

1989 by light and lemons

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Summary: PREVIOUSLY TITLED "Ineffable." Shit hits the fan when Mike Wheeler, former party-member turned total douchebag, meets Jane Hopper, new girl from fucking nowhere, in 1989. Senior year at Hawkins High just got a lot more interesting. AU - badboy!Mike. Warning: He's irritable, she's a sweetheart.

1. The Hangover That Started It All

FEBRUARY 8th, 1989 (Sunday)

Steve Harrington once told him that a can of Red-Bull was the ultimate cure to a killer hangover. At the time, he had said it with such conviction, such sincerity, that anyone would've been a fool to doubt King Steve's hefty advice. Mike could even remember that fucker going above and beyond, weaving an immaculate tale of how a Red-Bull had saved his relationship with Nancy, just to prove his point. Fifteen-year old Mike Wheeler had been nothing short of amazed. But eighteen-year old Mike Wheeler finally knew what a load of crap Steve Harrington had been feeding him with a silver fucking spoon.

"Fuck." Mike groaned, slamming down an empty Red-Bull onto the wooden, coffee table. That had been his third can of Red-Bull, yet his migraine prevailed, strong as it had been when he'd first arrived at Billy Hargrove's house about an hour ago. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had worsened.

"Still feel like shit, Wheeler?" Billy asked from across the table, where he was sprawled across a beat-up arm chair, a dying cigarette dangling off his mouth. Without waiting for a response, Billy motioned one of the boys to pass the bong they've been circling around back to Mike.

"Little Mikey can't hold his alcohol these days, huh? You goin' soft on us, froggie?" Troy snickered in glee at Mike's misery. It was a well-known thing around Hawkins that Mike Wheeler could hold his own against any liquor. More oftentimes than not (his friends could attest to this) he woke up the next morning after a hard night of partying completely fine, not a trace of a headache. But today was different – apparently, Macy Johnson's "Pre-Valentine Weekend Rager" had been a little too much for Wheeler.

"Eat shit." Was all Mike said as he graciously accepted the bong again. He didn't have the energy to take Troy's bait – his head was killing him and he seriously needed to take a piss. But first, a few more hits of Billy's leaves might help.

Grabbing the spare lighter off the table, his deft fingers quickly flicked it on and, with an ease that was almost envious, Mike took a big hit, letting the smoke seep deep into his lungs before breathing out contentedly. He did this a few more times until he felt the familiar haze of calmness wash over him, relaxing his senses once more. Passing the bong to his right, with James grabbing it greedily, Mike shrugged off his Sherpa-lined jacket and dragged himself off the shitty excuse of a couch.

"Fuck you going?" Troy demanded, his eyes pinned on Mike approaching the basement door. Absentmindedly, Troy snatched the bong right from James' lap just as he had finished packing a new bowl.

"Taking a leak," Mike grunted, disappearing up the staircase before anyone could respond.

His eyes winced slightly as he came up to the main floors of the Hargrove-Mayfield's house, the sunlight peering through the opened curtains reminding him that it was still very-much daytime, despite what the dark hues of the basement might suggest. One hand reaching up to rub his red-rimmed eyes while the other ran through his thick, curly locks, Mike started towards the bathroom, the familiar tiles and wallpaper easily guiding him to his destination. With years hanging around Billy, Mike knew this house like the back of his hand.

It was a small bathroom, tucked annoyingly in the far-back corners of the house. It barely fit a toilet but evidently the construction workers gave no fucks since they squeezed in a shower stall, a counter, and two sinks on top of that. Nevertheless, Mike felt terribly relieved – with drugs clouding his mind, the usual short walk felt like a fucking trek in the woods – as he approached the bathroom door, a relief that died immediately once he realized the door was locked.

"Oh my fucking—" He bit back a groan of frustration. There could only be one person in there. "Max! Can you get out? I gotta piss."

He waited two seconds before pounding his fist on the door. "Seriously open up, I really need to fucking pee. I'm like three seconds from pissing on your carpets right now, man."

Maxine Mayfield had been the talk of the town when she and her family moved from Sunny-side California to the buck-ass middle of nowhere Hawkins, Indiana. Although he'd quickly gotten along with Billy, whom Mike had met through Steve (fuck you Steve, Mike couldn't help but think, and your fucking Red-Bulls), he had never interacted with Max, despite them being in the same grade. To him, Max was some tom-boy who sassed people for no reason and got off on parading her too-cool, poetic, loner status to the rest of Hawkins High.

With every second passing and the door remaining locked, Mike felt his annoyance spike up a notch, his high wearing out as a result. When she didn't respond to his fourth knock, he briefly contemplated booking it to the backyard. He scratched that plan, however, knowing Billy would skin his ass if he accidentally pissed on Mrs. Hargrove's flowers. It was too much of a risk. And not worth losing his balls over.

Groaning, he resumed his previous antics, not caring that the wooden door wobbled dramatically each time he pounded his fists. "Max! I swear to God—" He yelled, resorting to threats. Not for the first time, he cursed the house for having only one goddamn bathroom. "If you don't open up right now, I will fucking—"

And just like that, the door creaked open, his words dying on his lips when he realized that the occupant stepping out warily in front of him was definitely not Max.

Where there should've been long, tangled, glaring red-hair, there were chestnut brown locks that curled above her shoulders. Where there should've been blue eyes, a pair of brown eyes bore back at him, wide and cautious. A mix of shock, alarm, and confusion caused his mouth to dry out as he took her in— she looked something like a fairy, her thin frame engulfed by the pale-pink dress she had on as she stood almost a head-shorter than his own six-foot stature. Licking his chapped lips, he decided she was the physical embodiment of the term 'fragile doll' – it was both strange and, for some reason, extremely fucking cute.

"Um..." She started before he could say anything, the sound of her voice making him tense. She chewed on the bottom of her lip

anxiously, clearly contemplating her words, before biting out a soft, "Hi Mike."

The familiar way she said his name threw him off. Sure, he was a popular guy and a lot of strangers (correction: a lot of chicks) liked greeting him throughout the small town – a 'Hey, Mike' down the halls and a 'What are you up to, Mike' when they caught him at the bleachers – but never had any randoms greeted him like she just did, as if she knew him personally or some shit. Mike was positive he'd never seen her before in his life.

His confusion must've been apparent on his face because the girl started stumbling over herself, trying to rectify the awkwardness of her knowing him and him being completely ignorant to her existence. "Uh- I mean—

"You're not Max," he interrupted, stopping her words all together. She raised her eyebrows in surprise and bit her lip again, giving a tiny shake of her head.

He shifted his feet, the surprise of the situation wearing off, and began putting the pieces together. Hawkins was a small town – a very, very small town – so he more-or-less recognized everyone's faces, at least those in his grade, considering they've all been in school together since elementary. And if she was at the Hargrove's, she must've been visiting Max (what a fucking shock, the loner finding a friend, and a girl at that) – she sure as hell wasn't visiting Billy – so Mike deduced she must be his age and in his grade. With all these pieces lining up, he decided that this must be the new girl the whole school's been whispering about.

At the end of winter break, Chief Jim Hopper of Hawkins Police had apparently adopted a child, a teenager who would be enrolled in Hawkins High's starting spring semester of 1989. When news broke out that it was indeed a girl who would be entering the school, Hawkins High buzzed with anticipation. Everyone wanted a new toy to fawn over.

New students were rare to come by since their sleepy town was by no means a thriving tourist attraction or a hot-spot on the map, so her impending appearance created a stir within the student body. Despite

all the gossip, however, Mike never caught where Hopper had adopted her from – was she from this town, or the next? Did Hawkins even have an orphanage? His questions, unfortunately, remained unanswered as his ears were hounded instead by mindless gossip of who this girl would be – what would she look like? Would she be new meat for the rowdy boys of Hawkins or another stereotypical girl that blended into the crowd?

It felt like all of January had been dedicated to gossiping about the new girl – Jessica or Anne, whatever the fuck her name was, Hopper. Even fucking Troy added onto the gossip mill by running his mouth in Mike's ear, claiming she'd be a new notch on his belt. It was all so fucking annoying. Despite all this chatter and excitement about her, he had never actually caught a glimpse of her face, not at lunch, in the halls, at a party or even at a football game when one of his boys managed to drag him to one. It was as if she was a ghost.

Turns out, she was as flimsy as a piece of paper, a pretty girl who dressed like she took clothes out of Nancy's old closet. His own curiosity sated, Mike decided there wasn't anything special about her. And that the hype around her had been just that: hype. How weirdly disappointing.

Taking her silence as a cue to leave, Mike squeezed through the doorway, his chest brushing past hers as he moved to the toilet. Before he went any further, a tight snag on his white t-shirt pulled his attention and halted his movements.

"Wait," she pleaded, the odd urgency in her voice making him turn around complacently.

There was a weird shift in the air. He felt it as he caught sight of her face. The awkwardness and anxiousness present a few seconds ago had washed away, replaced by a weird look of determination. Her eyebrows were scrunched, mouth tightly-lipped, and then she did the strangest thing – with a confidence he didn't think she could possess, she slipped closer to him, pressing their bodies together and completely invading his space. A whiff of something akin to fresh trees and earthly smells clouded his senses as she craned her neck to look at him.

"Woah," Mike instinctively stepped back, stopping only when his back hit the bathroom counter. "Personal space, much?"

His efforts to put space in between them were futile, however, as she ignored his words and shuffled closer, this time reaching out to clasp her hands on his arms, locking him in place. The shock of her cold hands erupted goosebumps on his skin and he might've shivered had he not been distracted by her eyes. Her brown eyes bore into his own, intense and never wavering. It made his mouth dry and fingers twitch in strange anticipation. The way she stared at him felt like she was taking him in for the first time. As if she was truly looking at him. He felt strangely naked.

Feeling pinned like a prey to its predator, Mike was unable to look away even if he wanted to as he waited for her next words.

"I'm..." She broke the silence, licking her lips in contemplation. For a split second, hesitation bled onto her face, disappearing as quickly as it came as her previous determination came back in ten-folds.

"I'm Jane," She introduced herself.

There was a long pause as Mike mulled over her words. "Jane." He repeated, testing the name on his lips. It didn't flow right. "That's your name?"

She—*Jane* flushed, looking entirely too unsure of herself, and tentatively nodded her head. She was so fucking weird, Mike assessed, watching her anxiously bite her lip and look away from him, the determination from earlier fizzling out as she reverted back to her awkwardness. He wanted to snort at how bizarre this was – some random-ass girl cornered him in a bathroom just to fucking introduce herself. He couldn't tell if the weed from before had affected his perception of this situation or if she truly was a weirdo.

Seemingly satisfied with herself – was that really all she wanted to say? – Jane released her grip on him and stepped back, shifting awkwardly on the balls of her feet as she stared at him expectantly. With space in between them, the weird tension from before easily faded away and Mike felt like he could finally breathe again. And think again. "Alright good to know." He said. "I'm Mike, you're Jane.

Now that we know each other's names, can you get out now?"

Jane looked oddly hurt from his words and he immediately felt like an asshole. He wanted to groan because seriously, what did she expect from him?

Just as he opened mouth to rectify his mistake (apologize) – why was he apologizing? – another voice spoke up, the interruption breaking the trance between the two as Jane immediately jumped a few feet away from him. "Jane?" Max stood at the bathroom entry, looking thoroughly confused as she took in the scene before her: a very guilty-looking Jane Hopper standing in a tiny bathroom with one Mike Wheeler. "What's going on here?"

Ticked off by the implications Max made, Mike answered before Jane could. "What does it look like Mayfield? I'm using your bathroom."

"With my friend in it?" Max fired back accusingly, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, she was showing me how the toilet flushed." He cheekily lied, mocking her stance. Sure, they didn't do anything wrong (Mike was determined to ignore how Jane planted herself on him) and it was probably easier to just tell the truth, but the red-head was seriously pissing him off, fucking jumping to conclusions and subtly accusing them of shit. It was way more fun to fuck with her. "What of it?"

Max rolled her eyes at his bullshit, the nerve of this kid lying to her face in her own goddamn home. Lucas was right – he was fucking annoying. "Whatever Wheeler," She relented, moving to clasp Jane's hand. "Billy's been looking for ya."

With that, Max turned on her feet and quickly made her way down the hallway to her room, dragging a reluctant Jane with her. It was only when he heard the slam of Max's bedroom door close did he move to shut the bathroom door.

Still thoroughly confused at what just happened, Mike ran his fingers through his hair, deciding then and there that he really needed to smoke that bong again.

2. In Which She Dazzles Everyone But Mike

Note: That feel when a chapter accidentally becomes 9k+ words. I had intended only 2k words, lmao.

FEBRUARY 11th, 1989 (Wednesday)

Hands-down, the best perk of senior year was lunch. There was something completely badass about the way all the seniors rushed to the parking lot after fourth-period, hopped into their BMWs and Volkswagens, and raced down to Benny's Diner. Sure, lunch was only an hour and the drive to Benny's took up almost a quarter of that time but it beat wasting away in the fucking cafeteria, surrounded by noisy underclassmen and shitty food. And if some of them suddenly decided after their meal that they didn't feel like going back for fifth and sixth-period, well...that was Hawkins' fault for letting them off school grounds in the first place.

Benny's was halfway packed by the time Mike and his friends rolled up, the tiny joint bustling with students moving and in out of the restaurant and its parking lot. Right as Mike turned into a parking spot and switched the ignition off, Carson, who'd been in the passenger seat, hounded on them. "Alright fuckers. Who's buying today?"

Groans and eye-rolls filled the car-space as they began to hustle out of Mike's Mustang. The irony that Carson, who was the most loaded amongst them, was the cheapest little shit was not lost on any of them. "Just spot us again, dipshit." Troy demanded once he stepped out from the backseat.

"You're fucking mental if you think I'm buying two days in a row." Carson snipped. They went out for lunch almost every day and it was tradition for them to take turns buying for the group. The only one who didn't buy as often was Mike, who was almost-automatically exempt since he always drove.

"What's the big deal? It's not like it's a fucking dent to your pocket." Landon added.

"I don't really care if it doesn't dent my wallet. I save my money for chicks, not you dicks." Carson smirked, looking way too proud of himself for that shitty comeback.

"Yeah, well, I know for a fact," Troy stressed that last word as they walked into the diner, a little chime following their entrance. Benny's looked even busier on the inside, with the line to the cashier almost reaching the door and most of the booths occupied. "I ain't buying today."

"And why not, princess?" Landon asked, feeling his fist twitch at the sight of Troy's smug face. True, he wasn't by any means short on cash either, but constantly buying food for these fuckers he called friends took a toll sometimes, especially when they were such goddamn freeloaders who exploited every penny. And he totally bought like three meals last week already, so what fucking gives?

"Did you numb-nuts forget or something? The party's going to be at my house this weekend. I think I deserve a burger for that, or at least some fucking fries." Troy insisted, his smirk oozing in satisfaction as his declaration was met with groans. He turned to the menu wall triumphantly. Maybe he'll get a shake today on top of his usual order of a burger, fries, and a pop just to fuck with whoever was buying.

"Whatever, man." Landon relented, rolling his eyes. It was another rule that whoever's house they were partying at that week was exempt from buying lunch since the price of trashing their house was tribute enough. "Better be a good party this weekend. Last Valentine's Day completely sucked ass."

Carson and Troy burst in laughter at that. "You're only saying that shit because Jennifer Hayes rejected your sad-ass." Carson recalled.

"Fuck her," Landon groaned, still annoyed that she'd bolted out of the room immediately after he had confessed his secret childhood crush to her. "I hear she gives bad head anyways." He grumbled in a sad attempt to salvage his pride. He never did find out why Jennifer had split, his anger and embarrassment blurring the memories of that night altogether.

"Man, you *wish* she went down on your saggy balls – Oh Jenny, how

I've loved you since the fourth grade! Please, just breathe in my face and I'll bust one right now!" Carson imitated Landon, his high-pitched wailing and Troy's obnoxious laughter drawing the attention of many on-lookers. Landon, burning in embarrassment, frogged them both in the arm.

"Ha. Ha. Real funny, fucking dicks." Attempting to change the topic, Landon turned to Mike, who'd been quiet this entire time, staring off to the side. "Yo Mike, maybe you should buy today." Landon suggested.

"Yeah Wheeler, be our sugar mama for once." Troy said as he slapped his arm around Mike, jerking Mike's attention back to his three friends who looked at him expectantly. "What'cha looking at there, froggie? Are those cheerleaders from Charlesville back again?" Troy asked, craning his head over his shoulder to where Mike had been staring off to. To his disappointment, there weren't any hot girls in short, blue cheerleading skirts or anything of that sort.

"Chill, Wich." Mike shrugged off his arm. "Just got lost for a bit, nothing important."

"Well come back to reality and help us deal with this buying shit, Wheeler." Carson demanded, flicking his thumb to stress how close they were to cashier.

Mike just rolled his eyes at Carson, a smirk dangling off his lips as he shoved his hands in his jean pockets. He started to walk backwards towards the direction of their table, reserved for them all the way in the back of the diner. "I sure as hell ain't paying." He said, not offering any explanation. "Just go grab Connor and force him to buy for us if it's that much of a problem." Mike suggested, motioning to one of their friends who were already seated at the big booth, having arrived earlier in a separate car with the rest of their group.

"And just get me a burger today." He called out in an afterthought as he walked away from them, easily ignoring the jeering of his three friends. What he couldn't ignore, or rather couldn't resist doing, was sneak another look over his shoulder at the sight that had caught his attention the moment he'd walked into Benny's.

He had noticed her the second he arrived. Jane Hopper was tucked cozily in a booth far across from his own, sandwiched between Max and the wall as she hugged a milkshake close to her. Mike watched (stared, really) as she alternated between taking large slurps of her drink and throwing her head back in laughter as she chattered on excitedly with her company.

As he slid into his booth, his boys automatically sliding over so he could sit center, Mike almost groaned when he realized his position allowed for a perfect view of her. Was it coincidence or sheer bad luck that tormented him? He couldn't tell.

Surprisingly, this wasn't the first time he'd seen her since that weird bathroom debacle. It wasn't even the second or third time. In fact, he'd lost count of how many times he'd seen her these past few days as she seemed to pop up everywhere – school parking lots, hallways, by his locker. Hell, Mike even saw Jane outside the Principal's office yesterday after they'd called him out of class to accuse him of graffiti – what were the odds that she had the bathroom pass the exact moment he had left Principal Neal's office? It was like the universe intended for their paths to cross. How fucking bizarre.

And each time he saw her, it was always the same thing: He would feel eyes on him and that familiar prickling sensation on the back of his neck, and he just fucking knew that it was her. Lo and behold, when Mike looked up, he would find her, a few feet away, with that same awkward smile and a readily "Hi Mike" fumbling out of her lips. And no matter how many times he dismissed her – giving Jane barely a look of acknowledgement before walking away – she always bounced back, anxious to greet him again the next time. Truthfully, Mike was impressed by her persistence, knowing undoubtingly that his rejections hurt her feelings.

This time, however, was different. As crowds grew larger with every second inching nearer to the height of lunch rush-hour, Mike's eyes never left Jane's table. This time, he was staring at her, completely bewildered by her company – along with Max, Jane sat with three of his former best-friends: Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Will Byers. What a fucking blast from the past.

The only thing that ran through his head was...how the Hell did she

know them?

"Alright ladies!" A tray filled with burgers, fries, and an assortment of condiments slammed down in front of him, pulling Mike's attention back to his own table. One look at the way Carson stood gleefully in front of a dismayed-looking Connor, as Troy and Landon happily trailed behind holding cups of pop and shakes, and Mike immediately knew who bought lunch. "Food delivery is finally here, from yours-fucking-truly." Carson said, plopping into the booth. "I even bought you some yellow peppers, Wheeler. You're welcome."

"I'm allergic to peppers." Mike deadpanned as he smeared a generous slop of ketchup onto his burger.

"Yeah, I know. I just wanted to fuck with you." Carson admitted, hollering another laugh as Mike flipped him off.

With everyone digging into their lunches, it wasn't long before Mike forgot about Jane hanging around his old friends. Yeah, it was a shock but what did it matter to him? It wasn't any of his business who she hung around with and he didn't give a fuck about the likes of Lucas Sinclair, whose judgmental and self-righteous attitude had been one of the breaking points in their friendship. It was all in the past, Mike decided, waving his initial surprise away, and Jane Hopper – once she got over her weird fixation over him – would soon fall into his past as well. All in a matter of time.

"Holy shit," Brandon, a kid sitting on Mike's left, mumbled, sounding startled. "Is Jane Hopper coming up to us?"

His rhetorical question prompted most of their group to look up curiously, Mike included, and sure enough, the boys watched, slightly mesmerized, as the brunette beauty timidly approached their table. And despite the sigh of exasperation threatening to escape his lips, Mike couldn't stop himself from trailing his eyes up and down her slim figure. Privately, he admitted that she looked cute in that jean skirt and cream sweater.

Landon, who'd been sitting at the end of the booth, stood up quickly as she approached. "Hey there Hopper, you lost?" he flirted, an easy grin on his face as he appraised her heart-shaped face and brown

eyes.

"Hi Landon," Jane greeted, a polite smile appearing on her lips at the sight of her classmate. He was the boy from her English class, she reminded herself, the one caught snoring while they went over Shakespeare's *Othello*. Remembering her manners that Hopper had ingrained in her, she kindly asked: "How are you doing?"

"Fine, great – better now that you're here." Landon said, ignoring the snorts behind him at his lame-ass come-on. Mike rolled his eyes at how pathetic his friend was being – he was laying it real thick for a weirdo like Jane Hopper. Feeling strangely annoyed, he grabbed a fork and started stabbing his left-over fries, head deliberately tilted down to avoid the inevitable interaction with Jane.

"I'm sorry," ever the interrupter, Troy stood up from his seat too, probably intent on seizing his chance to get at the new girl "but how does a cutie like you know a piece of shit like him?"

A distinctive "What the fuck bro?" was heard from Landon the same time Jane replied, "We met in our English class."

"English class?" Brandon chimed in, obviously excited for a piece of Jane's attention. "Who do you have?"

It took her second to understand his question; he was inquiring about which teacher she has. Even after all these years, she still had trouble grasping the lingo that people used.

"Um..." Mike heard her say, voice full of uncertainty, and he imagined that she was doing that lip-biting thing as she sported her classic look of awkward confusion. "I forgot her name," Jane flushed embarrassingly. Despite being in school for a month, she had trouble remembering her teachers' names – she'd always been better with faces. "I think it started with an F...maybe."

"Franklin?" Brandon asked.

"No, idiot." Landon interjected, annoyed at Brandon's attempt to relate to Jane. "It's Ferguson."

Carson laughed at that. "Why would she be in Franklin's class? You're

the only dumbass here who's still stuck in eleventh-grade English courses."

Just as Brandon stood up, intending to throttle Carson's ass, Jane intervened. "I don't think you're stupid." She assured him, her soft sincerity easily melting Brandon's anger away. The boy proceeded to sit back down, a bit dazed as he mumbled a short "Thank you" to her admission. Mike stabbed his fork a little harder at how starstruck Brandon sounded. Fucking loser.

"So, Hopper" Troy began again, wanting to milk the most of this conversation. He had seen the Chief's new daughter around town a few times but never felt that it was the right time to approach her. Imagine his surprise when she showed up to Benny's of all places, looking like a gift waiting to be unraveled. "What made you come to our side of the joint? I saw you earlier, you know, hanging out with Mayfield and those losers."

"Losers?" She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion at the hostility in his voice. "They are not losers. They are my friends." Jane defended.

"Friends?" Troy sneered in that disgusting way that made Mike remember why he hated him so much in middle school. "You? Friends with that?" Troy scoffed in disbelief, like he honestly couldn't wrap his head around that thought. "Why would you be hanging around those faggots? I get that you're new to Hawkins or whatever, but they're all a bunch of fucking queers. Did they pay you to—"

"Troy." Mike interrupted, catching everyone's attention when the threat in his voice immediately ceased Troy's chatter. "Back the fuck off." He demanded, holding Troy's stare until the other boy relented. Although he doesn't associate with his former friends anymore, Mike doesn't tolerate other people bagging on them, especially if it had to do with Will Byer's closeted sexuality. It just wasn't cool in his books to be a homophobic douchebag.

Too invested in putting Troy in his place, Mike failed to notice the dreamy look that fell upon Jane's face as she soaked up his demeanor. Despite how intimidating he looked, a frown weighed on his lips as he glared down Troy, Jane couldn't deny that flutter in her stomach that appeared as soon as Mike lifted his head up.

"Hi Mike," she shyly greeted, breaking the tensed silence that fell over the group of boys. Her words snapped Mike's eyes on her and Jane reveled in the way he took her in.

"Hi." He said flatly. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." Jane replied, her simple honesty catching everyone but Mike off-guard.

Mike rolled his eyes, ignoring the numerous looks of surprise his boys were shooting him. She made every word sound so goddamn intimate, it was exhausting to keep up with. "You shouldn't be here. You should go back to your friends."

"But—

"Woah, woah, woah." Carson jumped in, bewildered to see Mike Wheeler turn down a girl's advances. Sure, Jane Hopper reeked of that boring small-town girl vibe, but she was easy on the eyes. The whole reason he hung around these dicks was to get at girls, not chase them away.

"Why are you being such a dick, Mikey?" Carson probed, slinging an arm over Mike. Grinning sleazily, he made exaggerated movements with his free hand as if to dispel the tension in his friend. "She's just trying to have a good time, right Hopper?" Jane, completely missing the flirty wink Carson sent her, nodded enthusiastically in agreement, grateful that someone was helping her be Mike's friend.

Shrugging Carson off, Mike opened his mouth to tell Jane to fuck off only to be cut off by Landon, who slid his greasy arms over the unsuspecting girl. "Jane," Hyperaware of Mike's glare boring into him, Landon leaned closer to the brunette. He cupped a hand towards her ear as if he was sharing a secret. "Trust me when I say this: don't hang around Mike Wheeler if you're looking for a good time."

Seeing the uncertainty on Jane's face, he quickly elaborated. "That guy," Landon gestured to Mike, who lifted his middle finger in retaliation. "He's a boring piece of shit. Not a good time, whatsoever. If you want, though, maybe we could hang out and—"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Landon—" Mike snapped, pissed off beyond reason that Landon kept making moves on Jane.

Feeling Mike begin to rise from his seat, Carson roughly pushed him back down. "He's abso-fucking-lutely right Hopper." Carson interrupted, his grin reminding Jane of the Cheshire cat from Alice and Wonderland. "Fuck Wheeler. You should get to know us better. We're the definition of a good time. We can show you around, show you how to have fun."

"Fun?" Jane licked her lips unsurely, not quite understanding what he was suggesting. Fun as in when Max showed her new skateboard tricks? Or when Dustin invited her to swim at the quarry – that type of fun?

"Yeah fun." Carson grinned wickedly, knowing that Mike was going to kill him for suggesting this. For some reason, Mike really didn't like this chick and what kind of friend would Carson be if he didn't exploit this tidbit of information? "Like this weekend. Troy here is throwing a party for Valentine's Day. You should come. It's going to be wild."

"And fun?" Jane asked, eyes glinting with intrigue.

"Heaps of fun." He promised.

"Mike will be there?" She asked, weighing her options. Sure, Max had explained that parties "completely sucked ass," reeked of "piss and vomit," and were for people who "had an IQ lower than a fish's IQ" (whatever that means), but the thought of seeing Mike Wheeler again on the weekend was so tempting. She'd been away from him for so long that she was determined to seize any opportunity of interacting with him, even if he always seemed less than pleased to see her.

"Hell yeah, he'll be—"

"What the fuck, Carson?" Mike cut in, the bite in his voice fueled by the way Carson leisurely raised a lone eyebrow at him. "Why are you inviting her? You don't even know her."

"So, I can get to know her, duh." Carson said patronizingly, stealing a

fry from Connor who just came back with a second round of food. "Come on Mikey, use your fucking brain for once."

Adamantly ignoring the slew of insults Mike began throwing at him, Carson turned to Troy. "Yo Troy, is it cool if Jane comes to your party?"

Feeling Mike's glower shift from Carson to him, Troy's scowl morphed into a wide smirk. From the way Troy triumphantly glanced at Mike before addressing Carson, as if reveling in Mike's displeasure, it was obvious to everyone (but Jane) that Troy was still pissed at Mike for shutting him down earlier.

"Sounds fucking lit to me, man." Troy said with an easy shrug. He really didn't know what was Mike's deal with the Chief's daughter – she was hot as fuck, in his opinion – but if her presence truly pissed Mike off enough to fuck up Mike's night, then by all means Troy would willingly pick her up and drive her himself to his own goddamn house party.

With those six simple words, Mike's fate was sealed. Barely resisting the urge to slam his head down in frustration, Mike could only watch helplessly as a wide smile broke out on Jane's face, knowing instinctively that he would see her again on Saturday night.

It was going to be a wild Valentine's Day, no doubt about that.

There was an obvious skip to her step as she all but glided back to their booth, Max noticed distastefully. El Hopper looked like she was on cloud-fucking-nine and it was all because of that damn Mike Wheeler. Not for the first time this week, Max cursed herself for letting El out of her sight that fateful Sunday afternoon. Sure, El really needed to pee but was the release of her bladder worth all this heat Max was getting from Chief Hopper for accidentally letting El meet – re-meet – Mike Wheeler? No, it fucking wasn't.

Max shook her head as they all silently watched El set down her third strawberry milkshake (El's sweet tooth never failed to amaze Max), daintily smooth the back of her jean-skirt down, just as Joyce had instructed her to, and slide into the small booth. Fucking Hell, Max

dreadfully realized as El began swiping the whip cream off with the end of her straw, El was fucking humming. *Humming.*

"El." It was the disapproval in Lucas' voice that stopped the girl's happy humming, his tone reminding El of all those times Hopper chastised her for breaking one of his rules. Biding her time, she gingerly licked the corners of her lips for any excess cream before lifting her head to meet Lucas' stare. "What was *that*?" Lucas immediately jumped on her.

It was silent for a moment before El responded, "I told you I was getting another milkshake."

"No, no." Dustin interrupted, wagging his pointer finger at her. If El thought she could pull that innocent crap and dazzle them with a cute smile, she had another thing coming. "Don't give us that bullshit, El. You were totally macking on Mike, just right now!" He exclaimed, gesturing to the direction of Mike's booth.

Unable to help herself, El sneaked a tiny glance at said-boy, peering under her lashes as she watched him slip his leather jacket on, slide out of the booth, and head for the door, his group of friends trailing loudly behind. El was tempted to wave at him and she might've done so had it not been for the rough tug on her sleeve, courtesy of Max dragging her back to reality.

At the looks on everyone's faces, El managed a weak smile, unable to comprehend how they'd caught her staring at Mike again. In El's opinion, she'd been extra-sneaky this time.

"I'm sorry, but..." El furrowed her eyebrow in confusion "What does 'macking' mean?"

While Max and Dustin simultaneously groaned at her question and dramatically slouched down on their seats, Lucas merely shook his head – another Hopper move, El noticed in amusement – therefore it was up to Will to explain the relevance of word. "Macking is uh," he struggled to find the right definition "It's like you were hitting on him."

"I would never hit Mike." She objected immediately, upset that they

would describe her in that way.

"No, no, I didn't mean it like *that*." Will immediately regretted his words when he caught her frown. El was very sensitive about hurting people so he felt like a dick for insinuating that notion. "What I *meant* to say was...um...well...m-macking is—

"Oh my god," Fed up with his sputtering, Max straightened up and twisted to face El. "Dude," She grabbed the brunette's hands for emphasis. "You were *flirting* with him. Hard-core. Dreamy eyes, hair twirling, and all that shit. It was nauseating to watch and frankly speaking, you need to stop or Hopper's going to kill us all. Capiche?" Seeing the confusion appear on El's face, Max quickly fixed her wording. "I mean – do you understand?"

It was only when that familiar look of guilt crept on El's face – same one as when she'd caught El with Mike in her goddamn bathroom of all places – did Max let go of El's hands, satisfied that El understood.

"I wasn't flirting with him." El pouted. "I just wanted to say hi."

"You shouldn't even be doing that." Lucas told her, crossly. He'd been the first one to object this whole 'Turn-El-Normal-And-Enroll-Her-Into-High-School-To-Hide-Her-In-Plain-Sight' plan. It was all bullshit, bullshit that would surely blow up in their faces or, at the very least, bite them in the asses. "Mike shouldn't even know that you exist."

El frowned and sank further into her seat, her milkshake now tasting stale at the reminder of Lucas' words. Though she knew it was wrong of her to approach Mike – Hopper had drilled in her countless times the severity of their situation (and it seemed he'd done the same with Lucas, who'd always been the most responsible one out of all of them) – El couldn't help herself. There was something about Mike that drew her in. Maybe it was those pretty spots on his face ("Freckles, El. They're called freckles," Max had told her). Or his curly hair. Or his eyes. Whatever it was, it was driving her crazy. El wanted to look at him, talk to him, get to know him, touch him – be surrounded by all things Mike Wheeler. It was crazy. *She* was crazy.

"Well that plan went to complete shit." Dustin bluntly commented.

Deliberately making a show of pointing to his watch, Dustin pursed his lips mockingly as he checked the time. "Would you look at that? Hmm, 12:45...It's been, like, what...only a fucking month of school? And we already fucked up." Hopper had one condition when he finally relented and enrolled El in school – under no means was she allowed to look, speak to, or even breathe the same air as Mike Wheeler. And they couldn't even follow that.

"Technically, it's been less." Will corrected, blushing when everyone turned to him expectantly. "I mean...El saw him on Sunday, yeah? So, it's been less than a month." He elaborated, resisting the urge to twirl his pointer fingers together. It was a weird habit formed from his social anxiety, one Will was desperately trying to break. The last time he'd been caught doing it, Troy and his brownnoser-slash-lackey James had slammed him into a locker for "acting like such a queer in public," making Will decide he'd much rather break the habit than deal with their bullshit. They were such douchebags.

"Oh great. Even better – less than a month." Dustin rolled his eyes at Will's technicalities. "All thanks to Max." Dustin snidely huffed at the red-head, always one for the blame game.

"What?" Max snarled, her body tensing at the accusation, as if readying for a fight. El always thought Max looked like a wild tiger when she got defensive like this. A pretty, red tiger. "How the fuck is this my fault?"

"Oh, I don't know—" Dustin tapped his chin with a fry he'd stolen from Will's plate. The smaller boy, too interested in Max and Dustin's quarrel, didn't notice. "Maybe because it was your bathroom!"

"For the last time, she needed to pee—

"How convenient for you!" Dustin sneered, his eyes never straying from Max's as he double-dipped in Lucas' ranch (he gingerly ignored Lucas' disgruntled "Dude!"). In his opinion, Max could've easily avoided this problem had she just followed El to the bathroom. Wasn't it a thing for girls to go to the bathroom together?

From the start, Dustin knew El was a goner, having caught her during her first week staring across the quad at Mike. The way she looked at

him, all heart eyes and long sighs, made Dustin realize El was going to be completely unreliable in following Hopper's plan. It was only a matter of time before she cracked and sought out his former best friend. That's why Dustin had placed all his faith in Max, knowing the two girls spent 23 of the 24 hours of the day together. He figured Max would be the barrier between El and Mike, had even hoped their friendship would keep El in check if only for a few more months until graduation. But (evidently) Dustin miscalculated.

"—What was I supposed to do? Follow her in there? Fucking flush the toilet, or maybe wipe her ass for her?" Max's face heated up with every word she spat out, making her freckles stand out glaringly.

"You're our zoomer." Dustin pressed, knowing Max valued that title more than she'd care to admit. "You're supposed to be there for us, for El—

"Oh, cry me a fucking river, Henderson—

"Guys!" Lucas yelled over them, sick of their banter. Will and El, who'd been watching the fight like it was an intense ping-pong match, jumped at his interruption. "Both of you, just shut the fuck up! You're not helping at all, if anything you're just drawing unnecessary attention to our table, so zip it!" He did a zipping motion across his lips, making Max roll her eyes at how nerdy he was. Why did she hang around these losers again?

"Okay, I'll shut up if you say you agree with me." Dustin bargained, ignoring the death glare Max instantly shot at him. If there was anything that pissed Max off more than Dustin bagging on her, it was Lucas not taking her side.

Lucas sighed heavily at Dustin's request and contemplated his next words carefully – on the one hand, he'd never hear the end of it if he didn't agree with Dustin, who'd spend hours bitching at him for choosing a girl over their long years of friendship. But, on the other hand, Max'll be pissed beyond belief and that was just terrible on a whole 'nother level.

She was a feisty girl, hotheaded as her hair might suggest, but when she was mad, it was all cold shoulders and silent treatments. And

Lucas really didn't want to deal with her icing him out, especially when he planned on inviting her to the drive-in movie theater tomorrow. He was hoping they could make out to the reruns of "A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master." With Valentine's Day creeping up, it was time he got some sugar from his quasi-girlfriend, mostly fuck-buddy.

Feeling Max's anger worsen the longer he took to mull over his decision, Lucas hastily opened his mouth. Sorry Dustin, he mentally apologized, the pussy power is strong in this one. "Look, uh—

Ever the saving grace, Will interrupted. "Dustin, that's not fair." He sounded more like his mother than he'd ever realize. "This isn't Max's fault. It's no one's fault. It was a coincidence that El had met Mike in the bathroom, right El?"

Although El couldn't remember what 'coincidence' meant – it might've been Hopper or Joyce who introduced that word to her; El made a mental note to look it up again later – she nodded in agreement, hoping her friends would stop fighting. Despite knowing that Max and Dustin would be fine – their friendship worked on arguments and mockery – it still gave her anxiety when people fought.

Still pissed, though noticeably deflated from Will's admissions, Max bit out, "You know, if you nerds helped more, we wouldn't be in this situation." Just because they had their stupid AV club activities – how was that shit not disbanded by now – didn't mean that all the responsibilities of keeping El in line fell upon her. That shit just isn't right. Especially since El was a goddamn wild card. "The amount of times El approached Mike this week is ridiculous. Like, I don't even know how Hopper isn't hunting me down right now—he's just barely started to let go of that bathroom fiasco."

As El swirled to place a firm hand on Max's shoulder, her brown eyes serious as she promised Max "I won't let Hopper hurt you," Lucas cried out in surprise, "What? Hopper doesn't know?"

Somehow Hopper had found out about El and Mike meeting each other last Sunday – Lucas had a sinking suspicion that Will had spilled the beans to his mother, who probably tattled to Hopper

during one of their "late night smoke hangouts" – and Lucas assumed Hooper knew El was actively pursuing Mike at school ever since. But, apparently not.

Patting El's hand reassuringly, Max shot Lucas a condescending look. "Would I still be alive right now if he knew El's been approaching Wheeler every two hours since Sunday?" She deadpanned.

"El, seriously?" Dustin groaned. Though Max's words sounded like an exaggeration, he wouldn't have been surprised if it wasn't. "Come on, dude. You're really fucking us over right now."

At his words, El winced guiltily. The shame worsened as Will gently reached across the table for her hands. His touch was cool and comforting, reminding her of Joyce, and he had a kind look on his face, one of understanding. "El..." Will began and she felt a lump form in the back of her throat at the sound of his voice. "Look, El. I-We," he corrected himself "We understand that Mike was the one who found you in the woods, but it's- it's really not safe for you to talk to him. He doesn't know about your powers," Will's voice dulled to a whisper, mindful of their setting. He wasn't saying anything she didn't already know, yet she felt the hole in her chest gape a little wider at the reminder of her situation.

"—your past, about you, about any of it. And we can't drag him in this mess." And by 'we,' Will meant El. El cannot drag Mike into this, she read between the lines. "We gotta stick to the plan, listen to what Hopper said – we need you to keep a low-profile, which means staying away from Mike Wheeler. We cannot risk those bad men coming after you, again." He finished, his tone not allowing any room for argument. If Max, Dustin, and Lucas weren't so worried for El, who was silently taking in Will's words, they might've been impressed by fragile Byers sounding so assertive.

"Plus," Dustin quipped, his earlier spite towards Max completely gone as he broke the tensed silence. "Mike's a douchebag now, anyways."

Lucas guffawed at that, his laughter helped crack the tension. "A really, really big douchebag." He added comically, making El's lip tilt a tiny bit upwards.

Still, she was conflicted. And as Max joined in to shit on Mike, adding to Dustin and Lucas' obnoxious chortles, El mused over her thoughts, frustrated she had to sort through her feelings. It was a simpler time back in the laboratory, she compared. People might've controlled her actions, but never her feelings. She felt what she felt; El never had to question if what she was feeling was right or wrong. It wasn't a matter of confliction, but of being true to herself.

But now, El looked at her friends laughing and at Will who stared expectantly but not unkindly at her, it was different. Now, she had people she needed- *wanted* to think of, wanted to protect. She wasn't Eleven anymore, the girl who needed to be selfish to survive, she was El. El was the girl who had beautiful friends, a new father figure, and a woman who cared for her as much as Mama probably would have.

Forgetting Mike was the logical thing to do, as his presence could and would disrupt the fragile peace she'd obtain for her new family. Mike Wheeler was the promise of an inevitable danger, a boy who everyone was sure would "fuck everything up." And a boy who was apparently a "douchebag," a term she deduced held some bad meaning, given the way her friends were still mocking him.

Yet despite all this, El couldn't find it in herself to relent – to her, Mike Wheeler was good.

Although El didn't know a single thing about him, having only met him once, she knew he was good. El felt it in her bones.

Mike was warmth during that cold, rainy night. He could've easily left her, a shaven-head girl drenched in misery, pain, yet he stayed. And as he wrapped his lanky arms around her shivering body and pressed his wet jacket around her tiny shoulders, he breathed life into her. It had been a magical moment.

Mike's touch made her realize how broken she was, having never experienced anything but the coolness of metal (metal beds, metal chairs, metal, metal, metal) in her entire life, and as her salty tears mixed in with the rain, El felt her brokenness slowly mend with hope. By the time they'd arrived to the police station, where she'd then met Hopper, El felt alive – felt reborn. Like a new person.

Even now, years later, El wasn't sure if Mike saved her or if she'd saved herself, as the memories of that night blurred along with the rest of her past. It didn't matter though, El decided, because at least she was certain of one thing: Mike Wheeler was good.

Feeling her resolve strengthen at her reminiscing, El reached forward and grasped Will's hand. If her hold was too tight, he didn't show it, too surprised by her sudden movements. In the corner of her eyes, she saw her other friends stop their talking.

"I understand..." El paused to find the right words. If it was one thing she hated about herself, it was this: her inability to express herself through words. But Joyce had always reminded her that she will get better at this talking thing – at this life thing and that had been El's silver lining ever since. "I understand...what you are saying, Will. But..." El tried to pour all her heart into her next words, praying that her friends would understand. "I really want to be Mike's friend." El said simply, her words fading out to barely a whisper.

The diner, now at the peak of rush-hour, still bustled noisily, louder than before as high-schoolers poured in and out, balancing their limited time between eating and gossiping, yet the sincerity in El's words overpowered all of that. Her words deafened them – it made the diner's rowdiness become nothing more than background noise – and as El deciphered the shock on all their faces, she felt a hum of satisfaction erupt in her stomach, a good indication that maybe she had communicated successfully. Maybe they had understood her completely, this once.

Will opened and closed his mouth a few times, completely at a loss of words. For some strange reason, he really wished he had his pencils and paper right now, wanting nothing more than to capture that warm innocence on El's face as she spoke of Mike. Her honest words astounded him. She was the definition of genuine, he thought.

When the silence dragged on longer than El was comfortable with, her skin flushing in embarrassment and awkwardness, Will cleared his throat, deciding to speak as their friends were obviously too shell-shock to say anything. It wasn't every day that quiet El Hopper shared her feelings.

Although he felt the weight of her words, Will knew he needed to stand his ground. Hopper was right in his paranoia and suspicion – there was too much at stake to sacrifice their safety over a measly friendship. Too many people were involved, too many people who knew of the dangers lurking around Hawkins waiting to pounce any moment. It wasn't smart to add Mike Wheeler into all this bullshit.

Will might not be friends with the guy anymore, but he still cared for him. And as much as Dustin and Lucas tried to pretend otherwise, Will knew they felt the same. It wasn't safe for Mike to get tangled in El Hopper, a girl who attracted supernatural trouble and death.

It wasn't safe, Will repeated this like a mantra. Fully intending to shut El down, he pushed back the voice in his head that screamed he was going to break El's heart with his next words. Safety, he reminded himself, about to tell El to forget about Mike, it was all about safety. Unfortunately, the words that slipped out of his mouth did not resonate with any of this. "Alright." Will had said instead, his resolve cracking on its own. "How can I help?"

Everyone gaped at the skinny boy, shocked by his response. Even Will blinked in surprise of himself, having not registered his own words until a bright, large smile broke out on El's face. Before he could say anything else, she hastily yanked his hand close to her chest, pulling his body slightly over the table. "Thank you," El mumbled, the soft gratitude in her voice making Will weakly smile.

"So now what?" Max asked once El and Will separated, confused by what just went down. First Byers was adamantly against El's Mike-quest, but then he made a complete 180 flip and now he decided he was somewhat team Mike and El – did that sum it up correctly? "Are we helping El get at Wheeler now? Is that what's happening?"

Though her question was (clearly) meant for Byers, Lucas took control of the conversation. "Hell no," He protested, throwing a pointed look at Will, who threw his hands up in mock-defeat. "We're sticking to the original plan." Lucas demanded predictably, making Max roll her eyes.

Although she didn't particularly care what the party decided to do, long as it kept Hopper off her back, it still annoyed her how uptight

Lucas was. He'd always been the most anal about following rules and the set plans, never one to take risks or change shit up. Lucas never strayed from the "safe path," always cautious of shit he couldn't control, and if they hadn't fucked so many times, Max would've been convinced that he was hiding a gigantic stick up his ass underneath those damn khaki pants he wore six days out of the week.

"Only this time," Lucas continued "we've gotta be extra careful. We've gotta up our game. Really keep El off the radar."

"How can we do that if she's already so popular?" Dustin asked. It was one thing to lay low when you're hiding out in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, but it was another thing to try to do so in high school. It's only been a month yet Jane Hopper has dazzled most of Hawkins High with her beauty and charm, even if she just didn't realize it herself.

"I'm sure the hype around her will die down eventually." Lucas insisted. "Things will fizz out in a few more weeks, then she'll be normal like the rest of us. By that time, it'll be easier for her to keep a low-profile. I can go talk to Hopper about this and maybe we can arrange something else for El, something safer." He'd been stewing on these ideas for a while now, sort of like a back-up original plan in case the other one crashed and burned. Safe to say, with Mike Wheeler in the picture, it was heading in that direction and Lucas was determined to stop that. "Maybe she can attend school only a few days a week, I mean, Hopper's the Chief, right? I'm sure he can work out something with the school board and—

"No." El interrupted, stopping Lucas' spiel.

"No?" Lucas repeated, taken aback by the assertion in her voice. Behind him, Max, Will, and Dustin exchanged looks of bewilderment. "What do you mean 'no'?"

"I want to go to a party." She declared "Troy's party. This weekend."

"What?" Lucas protested immediately "Absolutely not—

"Troy— as in Troy Wich?" Dustin cut off Lucas. "You got invited to Troy Wich's Valentine's Day Banger?" He gaped, eyes lighting up, the

excitement in his voice unconcealed.

Cade Wich had been a complete menace all throughout '83 and '84, known for his infamous parties that ran on end for nights, filled with nothing but endless alcohol, hard drugs, and hot chicks. He'd been the definition of a Hawkins' legend, worshipped and mourned as such when it came time for his graduation. However, the underclassmen of Hawkins High immediately rejoiced when the following year of '85 brought the arrival of Troy Wich, his younger brother who continued Cade's legacy without question. There were many rumors that flew around – some complaining that Troy didn't live up to his namesake while others swearing on their mother's lives that Troy's bangers surpassed Cade's by a landslide. It was all such high school bullshit, yet Dustin couldn't deny his desire to experience all this shit too.

Of course, that wild fantasy had always been difficult to achieve since Troy Wich fucking hated his guts. And Will's. And Lucas'. And probably Max's by association. If only Dustin hadn't spilled chocolate pudding over Troy's pants in fifth grade (completely by accident, mind you), making the boy look like he shit his pants, then maybe their group could've been partying it up since the start of high school.

"Why would you want to go to that asshole's party?" Max asked, looking disgusted. Troy Wich was one of those fuckboys that hung around her step-brother and smoked out her basement every goddamn weekend. He constantly raided their kitchen (her pop always went missing when Billy had people over, so she'd taken it upon herself to hide that shit) and made passes at her whenever he could. The only thing slightly appealing about him was his loaded trust-fund and even then, he couldn't pay her enough to touch him with a ten-foot pole.

"Mike." El answered plainly, as if that explained everything. Which in her case, Max realized, probably does.

"You want to go, because Mike's going to be there?" Will questioned, deciphering her one-worded responses.

El smiled brightly and nodded her head vigorously, her confirmation making Lucas groan exasperatedly. The moment Will had responded positively to her pleas, she'd decided she was going to this party. She

was going to see Mike and nobody, not Lucas or Hopper, was going to stop her.

"You are coming too." El told Will, not caring for his stammers of surprise and shock. When he started protesting, El pinned him a meaningful stare, the determination burning in her veins as she convinced him to come with her to this "banger." "You offered to help. This is helping me." She reminded him, satisfied when he agreed (relented) with a resigned sigh.

"No, no, no! This is fucking crazy!" Lucas exploded, completely bewildered by what is happening. How did it get from 'Help-El-Blend-In-And-Avoid-Mike-At-All-Cost' to 'Help-El-Go-To-A-Party-And-Find-Mike'? "Am I the only one hearing this?" He looked to Dustin and Max for help only to be baffled by their half-hearted shrugs of 'Don't look at me, I don't fucking know.' "El, you can't go to that party. Trust me – it's asking for trouble. And to go just to find Mike? That's literally insane. And risky! Especially if it's just you and Will—

"I think I'm coming too. Wait, actually...nope. Fuck thinking – I'm coming." Dustin interjected, making Lucas sputter in shock. Oppositely, El grinned excitedly and tensely lifted her hand up to give him an awkward hi-five, just as he had taught last year.

"Dude! What the fuck?" Lucas cried in, pissed that another person was enabling the absurdity of this.

"'Dude' what? I'm down to get shit faced this weekend." Dustin said. All this dangerous, 'bad-men's-gonna-catch-us' thriller shit was stressing them out – he noticed how Ms. Byers' fingers shake when she takes a cigarette out of her Camels, saw how Will trembles when the sun sets early, and saw the tension creep on Max and Lucas whenever people approached El in school. They all needed to relax and what better way to do it than get drunk off of free alcohol? That and, there was no way in Hell he was skipping out on one of Troy's legendary parties.

"There's a tequila bottle somewhere with my name on it at Troy's house and I'll be damned if I don't claim it. And I'm sure there could be one for you too, if you want to join us Lucas." Dustin offered.

"Fuck no." Lucas declined immediately. He fucking hated Troy, there was no way Lucas would be caught dead at one of his shitty parties. "I can't believe you're actually agreeing to this shit—

"Alright, what about you Mad Max?" Dustin asked, turning to the redhead. "Want to come?"

Lucas groaned at being interrupted again. "Would you stop fucking cutting me off, you asshole—

"Oh come on," Dustin probed when Max noncommittedly shrugged her shoulders, completely ignoring Lucas. "It might be fun. And if it isn't, we can steal as much alcohol as we can and dip – probably come back to someone's house, drink a little more, then call it a night." He coaxed her, knowing that Max would much rather drink in the comfort of one of their basements than party with a bunch of drunken idiots. "Or would you rather stay home with Lucas and listen to him bitch all night about how we shouldn't have gone?"

Leaning back on the booth, Max pursed her lips at that and began to seriously consider Dustin's offer. Much as she hated to admit it, he had a point – she really didn't want to deal with a night full of Lucas complaining. Or, at the very least, she didn't want to be sober when Lucas started bitching. Just having this conversation made alcohol sound appealing. It was only when El turned to her and hit her with that big puppy-dog look (this is probably the same look El uses on Hopper to get her way, Max guessed) did Max finally agree, causing Dustin to cheer.

"You too, Max?" Lucas, however, looked appalled. "I can't believe you."

Max rolled her eyes at how dramatic he was acting. "Just come with us, Stalker." She told him, purposefully using that old nickname to sway him.

"Why should I?" He asked spitefully. The way he crossed his arms stubbornly told El that he was angry and she immediately felt guilty. She didn't mean to make everyone turn against his ideas, especially when he was only being protective. Before El could speak up and apologize, Max responded, "Because if you come, you can help keep a

look out on El. Make sure things don't get too crazy. And make sure no one gets too close to her.

"Troy's a little gross freak. I'm sure he's going to try to get at her since she's new meat and all that bullshit. 'Course, El can take care of herself but what if she accidentally uses her powers on him? How are you going to help us cover that shit up if you're not there when it happens? And think about it, Sinclair," she persuaded, pointing to El who blinked curiously "You might stop her from talking to Wheeler today, maybe even tomorrow, but eventually she's going to approach him again, I just know it. So wouldn't you rather be there when she does?" Max saw the wheels begin to turn in Lucas' head, the logic of her words slowly convincing him, so she pressed on. "And from what I can tell, he's not even interested in her – sorry El, but it's true – so all that's going to happen is that she gets the chance to say hi and then we get the chance to chill out and party together. Now doesn't that sound fun for Valentine's Day?" She asked, elbowing Dustin harshly when he tauntingly remarked 'Wow Maxine the lawyer, never expected that.'

It was quiet for a moment as everyone regarded Lucas expectantly, the silence only interrupted when Lucas heaved a long sigh, a good sign in Max's eyes. He chewed on his bottom lip, evidently debating the pros and cons in his head, before scooping his eyes around the booth, taking in the anticipation in Dustin's eyes, the curiosity in Will's, the expectancy in Max's, and finally the hopefulness in El's eyes.

"...We *cannot* let Hopper know about this," was all he said, finally relenting to this crazy-ass idea. Almost instantaneously, Dustin whooped loudly in excitement, completely oblivious to the look of bewilderment the girls behind him tossed over their shoulders, and Max grinned triumphantly as Will and El breathed identical sighs of relief.

"No, I'm serious guys—" Lucas stressed, anxiously checking around the diner as if the Chief would pop up any second. "If Hopper catches wind of this, I'm dead. Gone, forever. We *cannot* – like our alibi has to be some crazy shit – *cannot* let him know, at all. Because if he finds out..." He looked at his friends apprehensively, not daring to even finish his sentence. Call him a pussy all you want, but Lucas Sinclair

didn't fuck with the great white shark when he knew he was only a lowly bottom-feeder fish. That was just being smart.

Max might've snorted at his exaggerations but she too has dealt with the Chief's wrath before, so she could only manage a tense nod of understand at her would-be boyfriend. The other two boys merely gulped at the severity of this situation, all risked for the sake of some typical teenage fun. This better be some goddamn party because even when you have nothing to lose, the thought of losing at all was fucking terrifying.

Seeing the nervousness in her friends, El quickly laid a comforting hand on top of Lucas'. She knew that it was a big deal for him to agree to this.

"Hopper won't find out." She promised. "I will be careful." El said softly, the conviction and sincerity in her voice ebbing away Lucas' anxiousness, just as it did with Will. It was astounding how El managed to say so much with so little, making every word sound intimate and honest.

Pretty soon, the tension melted away as the conversation switched to lighter topics. Resuming their meal, Max and Dustin engaged in their never-ending argument of which condiment tasted best on Benny's Bacon Burger Deluxe, while Will and Lucas discussed their after-school options: since AV club didn't meet on Wednesdays, they had time after-school to stop by either the arcade or the comic store. And El, content to just listen in, continued to happily sip her Strawberry milkshake. Of course, with her sweet tooth, it didn't take long for El to decide to buy another one.

"So..." Dustin turned to Lucas once El went to order her food, dragging Will in tow. "Is Saturday actually going to happen? I seriously can't believe you agreed, man."

"Yeah, why not?" Lucas confirmed as he munched on some stale fries, sounding way calmer than before. Looking over his shoulder, Lucas watched Will complain loudly how El spent all of her allowance on milkshakes, making the girl giggle into her hand, before turning back to Dustin. "Long as Hopper doesn't find out, it should be fine." He said.

"Well, what about Mike?" What Dustin was really asking, was what were they going to do if their former best-friend became a legitimate problem.

"What about him? If he's as disinterested as Max makes him out to be, then I don't think we'll have a problem." Lucas assumed, looking to Max who nodded in confirmation. Though it's only been a little over three days, Max had seen that fucker Mike Wheeler reject El more times than she could count on both hands.

On the one hand, it fucking pissed her off how he keeps blowing El off – that little shit walked around, constantly doped up or smoking his little cigarettes, acting like a cliché-typical-manwhore-piece-of-shit yet he had the audacity to reject her angel of a best friend. It was sickening. Yet on the other hand, his disinterest actually relieved Max. Sure, Mike rejected El constantly but he did it in such a subtle way, oftentimes limiting their interactions by a few short sentences, that Max found herself quite impressed. Plus, the less they talked, the less chances Mike had of unraveling Jane Hopper's true identity, and the safer it was for all of them – safe from Hopper's wrath and the bad men's intervention.

"And what if he isn't disinterested?" Dustin probed, wondering how long Mike could resist El's charm. Even Lucas, a suspicious motherfucker who didn't take well to newcomers, cracked a little under a week and had actually apologized to the sweet girl for being such a standoffish asshole. Safe to say, it doesn't take much for people to fall in love with El, despite her being a socially-challenged weirdo. "What if Mike ends up liking El?" Dustin asked seriously, finding himself curious if that were to happen.

Immediately grimacing in disagreement, Max snorted at the absurdity of his suggestion. Wheeler and El? Now that was a crazy idea.

Max couldn't imagine Wheeler ever looking twice at El, let alone be interested in her. He had that whole bad boy thing going on – a crowd of girls, a dope-ass 'Stang, a close-knit circle of fuckboys who dealt drugs as much as they smoked it – and there was no way in Hell a telekinesis girl with a fucked-up childhood could ever fit into his world. They were just too different, Max thought. It was a crazy suggestion.

"If that happens," Max said, deciding to humor Dustin "then she's going to get her heart-broken, I'm sure of it."

"That would never happen." Lucas stated, sounding sure of himself. Max and Dustin might've asked what Lucas was referring to – the prospect of Mike interested in El or the notion that El would be heartbroken over Mike – had they not been taken aback by the sheer confidence in Lucas' words. "Mike Wheeler and El Hopper? Maybe in some alternative, fucked-up universe." Lucas sneered, sounding disgusted by the idea of it all. "But never in this lifetime."

"He's not good enough for her." Lucas declared, the finality in his voice satisfying Dustin's curiosity. "And if he knows what's good for him – he'll stay the fuck away from all of us."

Eventually, El and Will came back with matching milkshakes – the former successfully coercing the latter into getting one – and they all tossed in a few bucks for tip on the table, before making their way out of the diner. And as they all piled into Max's Camaro to head back to Hawkins High, the five friends were so utterly unaware of how this insignificant lunch had drastically shaped a new course for their lives, blissfully believing that this upcoming party would not affect the fragile peace and safety they've recently acquired.

But, boy, how fucking wrong they were.

End-Note: Thank you so much for all of your reviews, favorites, and follows. Your excitement and anticipation gives me the motivation to pull shit like this out of my ass. Mileven for fucking ever. Also, I posted this story on AO3 under the same name.

3. MadMax: Best-Friend Extraordinaire

FEBRUARY 14TH, 1989 (Saturday)

By the time Saturday night rolled around, the little excitement she had for the prospect of drunkenly trashing overly-privileged-dickweed Troy Wich's house was long gone, demolished and replaced by a heavy sense of regret and dread. Obviously, the universe was punishing Max for her spur of the moment decision at Benny's, morphing it into some type of catalyst for a shit-show, because the rest of her week pummeled down-hill faster than that time Dustin's bike-brakes broke right as he was racing her down a tall hill.

On Thursday, she flunked her stupid Econ test, despite cramming for four hours the night before with Dustin at the library. And then that night, of course Billy had to pick a fight with her crazy step-father. After splitting Billy's lip and bruising some ribs, Neil Hargrove swept her mother away a day earlier for their Valentine's weekend Chicago trip, face red and shoulders tensed as he drove off in his stupid Mercedes with her mother sitting warily in the passenger seat. Sure, Neil never laid a hand on her mother before (or else, Max would already be in jail by now), but he had left the house this time fuming and bloodthirsty, a horrible combination that pushed Max's anxiety into overdrive – but what could she do? After punching another hole in the wall, Billy packed up his shit, threw a few dollar bills in her face for food or whatever, and left too, leaving Max stranded and alone.

Friday hadn't fared any better. She and Lucas finally found time to go to the drive-in theater and it would've been fun if they hadn't spent the whole time fucking arguing. It had been such a dumb argument, the same one they've been having since they started seeing each other more intimately than the other party members. Somehow, they'd gotten on the topic of labels and immediately, the total girl within her jumped out and attacked; Max started grilling Lucas about their relationship and why the fuck wasn't she his official girlfriend and was he only messing around with her to get pussy action and, her favorite, was he hesitating because he was ashamed of her?

"Max," he bit out, looking and sounding very pissed. The movie was

still playing in the back, but it's been over twenty minutes since either one has glanced that way, and the radio was off. "...don't you get it?"

Get what? she wanted to scream – that she came from a fucked-up family with a flighty father who probably didn't give two shits about her and an abusive stepfather who liked throwing brawls with his own son more than anything else? Okay, so sue her she has commitment issues but that's only because her family is the white trash of Hawkins, Indiana and Max wondered, almost every day, why Lucas even puts up with her when he should really split and find some other girl who isn't an insecure piece of shit.

"I'm black—" he stressed, eyes frantically wide in hopes that it would shake some sense into her. She felt the familiar burn in the back of her throat at his words – there it is, the real problem between them: race. "Nobody around here thinks I deserve to breathe the same air as you – you, a nice, beautiful white girl – let alone fucking hold your hand or- or," he stuttered, furrowing his brows in confliction and she was almost grabbed his hand in reflex "or, God, even be allowed to touch you like I've already done. Sure, they don't outright say anything, but I *know*—" Lucas said gravely, eyes flickering among the cars around them with a keen awareness "I just know what they're thinking. What they're all thinking."

That's bullshit, she responded fervently. If anyone's not allowed to touch the other, it's her – she's the fucked up one, not Lucas with his soft eyes, kind smiles, and his respectful family. She told him this passionately, truly not grasping why race would be such a big factor in their relationship. Max didn't care about the color of his skin and she definitely didn't care about what anybody else thinks. They can all go fuck themselves, if they had a problem.

But as she ranted this, there was a sad-half smile crooking on his lips – she got the impression that he was slightly patronizing her and if she wasn't so damn confused, she'd be even more pissed – and Lucas slowly shook his head, before reiterating the same thing he always says: "It's just too dangerous for us, Max."

His words were like a punch in her gut, once again reminding her how fucking unfair life was. Their not-date ended with silence, with

Max roughly slamming the car door shut and trekking off into her house, without giving so much as a good-bye kiss.

All these shitty events occurring in such a short amount of time made Max contemplate bailing on her plans – maybe she should just sit home, order a large pineapple pizza, and mope; that sounded better than partying at some asshole's pad – and she would've pulled through with flaking had it not been for El, who phoned the Hargrove-Mayfield home-line asking what time she should head over. Hearing the pure excitement bursting from her best friend, the pity-party idea quickly went to shit as Max immediately invited El over at 6 p.m., telling the other girl to make sure Hopper wasn't too late since they needed time to get ready before the boys picked them up.

In true Hopper fashion, the Chief gave no fucks to proper time etiquette as he rolled up to the Hargrove-Mayfield driveway a little after 8 p.m. Barely squeezing in a good-bye wave and an affirmation that she'd be ready by 12 p.m. sharp for him to come get her tomorrow, El practically leaped out of the Chevy Blazer and sprinted into the house, her full pink duffle bag bouncing against her leg as she latched onto Max who'd been waiting on the porch. With another wave to the Chief, the two girls quickly hustled inside. If Hopper, under the impression that he was dropping off his adopted daughter for regular, old sleepover, was at all suspicious of El's excitement, he didn't act on it as he swiftly backed his Blazer out on the street and started off to Joyce's house, too excited for his own Saturday poker night plans to notice how unusually empty the Hargrove-Mayfield's driveway was tonight.

Immediately after entering the house, El tossed her stuff in Max's room before making her way to the tiny bathroom. Hearing the shower start, Max moved to her stereo and flipped some tunes on, before throwing herself back onto her bed. If there was one thing good about an empty house, it was that she could play her music as loud as she wanted to without fear of Billy harassing her to "turn it the fuck off." Billy was such a dick.

It wasn't long before Max lost herself in the music, the sounds of the Sex Pistols reverberating off her walls made the redhead flip onto her stomach and kick her feet up to the beats. Max made a mental quip to thank Jonathan once more for this badass mixtape next time she

popped by the auto-shop for an oil change. Speaking of Byers...Max pushed herself up with her elbows and knees to grab at her unzipped backpack and pluck out the Rubik's cube she borrowed (stole) from Will's backpack yesterday. Flopping back onto her comforter, Max started fiddling with the toy, her head easily bobbing to the songs blaring from her speaker. So into her (Will's) toy, Max barely noticed El emerging from the shower, hair damp and wrapped in a thick, white towel. It was only when the cube was snatched from her hands and began floating mid-air on its own did Max look up to acknowledge her best friend.

"Screw you. I almost had it, too." Max whined but quickly rolled off the bed to lower the music down.

"Sorry," El replied grinningly, looking unapologetic. "I called your name out a few times but you weren't responding."

"You could've just poked me, you show off." Max offered, her eyes trailing the cube that whooshed across the room onto her dresser.

"That's not as fun, though."

"Okay, point taken." Plus, Max loved seeing El use her telepathic powers – that shit was just too badass to miss. "Also, you have about a little over an hour to get ready. No pressure."

El furrowed her brows at that – she must've taken longer in the shower than anticipated. "Okay, then you need to help me choose my outfit quickly." With a flare of her hand, her duffle bag unzipped itself and clothes started flying out of it and onto the bed, paired outfits laid out for display just waiting to be chosen. There were a few skirts and dresses within the mix, with the appropriate stockings situated next to them, as El evidently couldn't go a day without them. In El's defense, winter this time of year had begun to lighten up slightly. Max, however, just rolled her eyes at how girly El was – former war weapon or not, El was such a *girl*, it made Max want to gag, sometimes.

"Hmm...I kind of like this one." Max declared, pointing at outfit number three.

"Which one?" El asked, approaching the bed. When she saw what Max had chosen, El barely stifled a laugh. "The overalls? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Warm and comfortable." Max justified. "And I got a pair of red chucks that'll look so cool with them. You can totally borrow them."

"Max, that's what I'm wearing tomorrow when Hop picks me up, so... definitely not."

"Okay, I respect your decision, but don't ask me why the boys aren't lining up when we get there." Max quirked, throwing herself back onto the bed right next to the outfits. She watched as El started rummaging around, peering intently at each outfit. "It's 'cause you passed up a pretty banging outfit."

"I don't care about other boys." El said immediately, her fingers reaching out to touch that new sheer blouse Joyce had bought her last month. The fabric felt soft to the touch and El marveled at how the woman had managed to snag such a beauty at the local thrift shop. "Just M—

"Just Mike." Max finished for her, rolling onto her back to hide her eye-roll from El. "Yeah I got it. Wheeler. He's wicked cool. Bomb. Fan-fucking-tubular. Did you know one time he took a shit in my house and didn't flush? Almost clogged the toilet. What a classy guy." The sarcasm, admittedly, was a little thick but hey, what the Hell.

But of course, El didn't even flinch at that gross statement, probably because it was about her precious Mike. Instead she laughed, fucking giggled into her palm, and shot a cheeky smile to Max, who had perched herself up with her elbows. "Hopper did that once – the cabin smelled terrible. And are you sure it was Mike? Doesn't sound like him."

Max didn't have the heart to say, *how would you know – you don't even know him*. Instead, she grimaced. "Oh, I'm sure it was – I was the one who slipped the laxatives in his food."

El gasped at her confession, eyes bulging in surprise, before bursting in laughter. Laxatives – Hopper had made a joke about laxatives before (and then thoroughly explained it to her) and though El's

never had some herself, she could only imagine how terrible it is.

Seeing her best friend laugh so heartily made Max split a grin, her blue eyes dancing with mirth. The redhead was reminded once more how great it was to finally have a female friend, one who wasn't a backstabbing-cow, plotting behind her back like those stupid Californian girls, and one who didn't care about their weight or their damn hair. Max was reminded how good it was to have El as a friend. El always made the bad shit in Max's life feel a little less serious, a little less terrible. "And what do you know?" She couldn't help but add on, not wanting the laughter to end. Her week was already starting to feel less shitty with El around. "His shit was green. He fucking shits money. How bitchin'"

It was such a stupid joke but El was such a good sport that she just doubled over again in laughter, her hands coming up to hold onto the bed railings for support. And long after the laughter ended, the huge grin remained on Max's face as they went back to choosing party outfits – sure, Lucas never validated her as a proper girlfriend, but she could always look to El to validate her sense of humor.

"So..." Max started up again as El shimmed into a prospective outfit; it had been Max's idea for El to try outfits on and then decide. God, Max realized with a stark sense of dread, she was almost as girly as El. "You excited to see Wh—*Mike* tonight? That is, if you see him." No doubt it's going to be a big party, she warned El during lunch yesterday, there's a slim chance that El will catch a glimpse of him, let alone even talk to him.

"Yes. I can't wait." El pulled up the zipper of the dress and looked at herself in the full-length mirror before turning to show Max. "I really want to talk to him – I haven't approached him since Wednesday."

"Not since our talk, right?" Max scrunched her face and gave a thumb's down to the red dress. "Nope, too fancy. This is a high school party, not a Thanksgiving potluck." The irony that El had worn this same dress last Thanksgiving made the brunette grin.

"Nope." El popped the 'P,' shimmying out of her dress. "Not since our talk." She confirmed.

After lunch at Benny's, Max had pulled El aside when the boys dispersed – in reality, Max kicked them out of her Camaro the moment she pulled back into Hawkins' parking lot, despite there being ten more minutes of lunch – for a heart-to-heart. She told El, firmly and frankly, that since the party agreed to go to "that asshole's party," El needed to "cough up a compromise." To put it short, Max demanded El to leave Wheeler alone for the rest of the week, for all their sakes. El, ecstatic about Troy's party, had easily agreed, knowing that being "half-happy" with compromises was better than nothing.

"Good." Max said as nonchalantly as possible; if El could hear the blatant relief in Max's voice, she didn't comment on it. It took a load off Max's chest to hear that El held up her end of the deal, not that Max had ever doubted her to begin with. Still, vocal confirmation was always appreciated.

Honestly, as much as she'd like to deny it, Dustin's words at Benny's had struck of cord in Max. Yes, he was a dick about – a complete douchebag actually – but in some twisted way, Max could see the logic in his thinking. She really was the one who spent the most time with El. Even though Dustin had played the blame game like some stupid second grader, he was right to demand her to step up her game as the best friend. She'd underestimated El Hopper's fascination with Wheeler and that needed to be rectified. Like ASAP.

Max needed to help steer this situation from the red zones and if that meant having more heart-to-heart talks with El more than usual (even though communication and feelings make her want to die), well then, she needed to suck it up and deal.

As El plucked at another skirt and blouse combo (Does El own any jeans? Or is she just immune to the cold? These are the questions that need to be answered.), Max was suddenly hit by another revelation on why her week has felt more shitter than a usual shitty week: Maxine Mayfield was scared shitless about what will go down between El Hopper and Mike Wheeler at Troy Wich's dumbass party.

Sure, Max had fed El some bullshit about the party being crammed pack (which isn't a lie), in hopes that it'll discourage El, but she knew El – El was a persistent girl. And if she was determined to hunt out

Mike Wheeler at this stupid banger, then by all means, she was going to hunt down Mike Wheeler.

What possibly scares Max most about all of this was the inevitable rejection that Wheeler will toss in El's face. What if El's heart doesn't survive a rejection from Wheeler? This doubt eats at Max, a doubt that circles around the similar insecurities of Lucas being ashamed of her because of her shitty upbringing. Both fears are fucking ridiculous yet it gnaws at her so heavily that she wonders how she hasn't collapsed yet, as dramatic as it sounds.

What would Max do if Wheeler truly breaks El's heart? She'd probably have to kill Wheeler.

But on the other hand, El Hopper, Max reminds herself, is as badass as they fucking come. Even though everyone treats her like a doll, ready to break at any given moment, Max knows the truth: El's a survivor. Even if fuckboy Wheeler turned her down – and he probably was going to, given how many times El has annoyed him recently – Max knew in her heart that El would have a rebound rate of .2 seconds and bounce back to doing more badass shit. She'd seen with her own eyes the tiny girl slaughter fucking demogorgons and grown-ass men who were twice as big as her awful step-father, so what type of harm could a high school boy bring? El was a badass motherfucker and anyone who underestimated that, including Max herself, could get bent.

Yet even with this reassurance, Max could still feel the doubt gnawing at the back of her mind, a doubt that clamored and demanded to be voiced. She needed to say something, warn El – give her a heads-up on how shitty it is to get your heart-broken. Max had never experienced that shit herself, but she imagined it's like a hundred times worse than that cold feeling she gets whenever Lucas shuts down and tells her she'll never become his girlfriend.

"Alright," El did a little happy twirl around the room, completely oblivious to the confliction stirring in her best friend. "What do you think about—

"El." Max interrupted, using that one tone that El's begun to associate with serious talks. She faltered slightly before turning to look at Max,

who'd sat up from her position on the bed. "I know you're excited and shit," Max started before El could say anything "but I need to, like, give you a reality check."

"Reality check?" El repeated, eyebrows scrunched. She approached the bed apprehensively.

"Yeah, you know, be hardcore honest." Max elaborated, shifting to make room for El to plop on the bed.

"About what?"

"The party. Mike."

"Okay," El drew out the word questioningly, like she didn't know what to expect.

"I just— I just need you to understand," Max paused and breathed through her nose, deliberately avoiding El's eyes. This sharing and communicating shit sucked ass. "that he's probably not going to be excited to see you there. Or...want to talk to you. At all." She said bluntly, warily lifting her head.

At the sight of El's alarmed eyes, Max frantically tried to explain. "I- I- I mean, he doesn't know you, dude! To him, you're a stranger and you just can't expect him to reciprocate positively to you. He doesn't know who you are, where you come from, what you can *do*. We don't even know if he remembers saving you that night."

Max's mouth felt parched, but the words kept slewing out of her mouth. "He barely met Jane and he'll probably never even meet El! You just have to take that into consideration, tonight. He- He might not even want to be your friend, like ever. And you just have to prepare for that, man. Prepare for him being an asshole and maybe telling you to fuck off, since you've badgered him so much recently. I don't know."

She was rambling at this point and even though the frown building on El's face was clearly telling her to shut the fuck up, Max couldn't stop. "And girls – oh my god, *girls*! They'll be all over him, tonight. You need to be ready for that. All these chicks, they fucking love him.

Like, he coughs a little in class and they just eat that shit right up, it's sickening—

"Girls?" El squeaked out, a heavy frown now embedded in her pretty face, her first frown of the night. There was horror in her eyes, like she'd never thought about Wheeler with other girls and Max hated that she needed to break it to her that, yes, Wheeler was a fucking manwhore but it beat El walking around like a naïve betty.

Still, she tried to round up her words quickly, as Max could feel how El was a few choice words away from becoming truly upset. "Anyways...what I'm trying to say is, be careful. Please. Be careful and be prepared. I don't want you getting hurt. Just know that if he doesn't want to get to know you, or be your friend, then fuck him. Seriously, fuck him."

The passion in her voice was undisguisable and at the very least, it made El crack a tiny smile, which was a huge hell yeah in Max's books. The redhead still felt like shit though. She just said, in a vomit of terrible words, that Mike probably wasn't interested in her, platonic or otherwise, and El needed to deal with it. Oh, and he probably has a bunch of girls, so she needed to deal with that too.

It was silent for a moment, as both girls digested Max's words.

Max's words, while brutally honest, were extremely thoughtful. It almost made El tear up how much the redhead cared about her. Her words also triggered an intense feeling flooding her stomach, one that she could only describe as bitter, maybe even wistful.

Unfortunately, every word Max had said, El had already known, at least subconsciously. She was well aware that Mike Wheeler wanted nothing to do with her – why would he? She was a stranger. She was nothing in his eyes. And of course, he had girls. He was beautiful.

And maybe she was romanticizing him, but how could she not? Until her conversations with him had a little more substance, there was nothing to go off from except for those blurry memories of him during that night, almost four years ago. And the only way to get to know him was to talk to him, ergo her constant "badgering" of him.

Geez, El couldn't help but think, what a mess. Maybe it was better to write off Mike Wheeler for good – it would certainly save her all these headaches.

"Alright." She said decisively, standing up from the bed.

"Alright what?" Max asked, confused.

"This will be the last time I seek out Mike." El promised, making Max's jaw go slack in awe. There was a look of determination in her eyes, one honed by assurance and confidence. "If he wants to be my friend, great. If not, that's okay too." She said, managing a reassuring smile.

Except it wasn't okay. El would be fucking devastated, but Max didn't need to know that.

"After tonight, I'll leave him alone. I don't want to keep lying to Hopper and if this keeps us safe, then good. And I don't want to..." El furrowed her brows, struggling for the right words "I don't want to be a burden to him. Bother him. That's not okay."

The room fell silent once more, this time both girls mused over El's words. Never in her wildest imagination, did Max expect El to say *that*. She didn't know what to make of it. Instead of responding, Max decided to scrutinize El's outfit and change the topic. This was so fucking heavy right before a party.

"That," Max said, pointing to El's outfit "that's the one. You should go with that."

Heaving a relieved sigh, seemingly thankful for the topic change herself, El gave a wide smile, looking way more genuine than her last smile. "You really think so?" El asked, walking back to the full-length mirror.

"Yes, it's cute." Max assured her.

"Awesome."

It was silent once more, broken slightly only when El started humming along with the music and Max was reminded once more of

Benny's, of El being so happy that she was hummed while slurping down a milk shake. El had been so ecstatic at the prospect of seeing Wheeler at the party and even more so when all their friends agreed to come along and suddenly, Max felt like the biggest dick in the world. Not only did she give a shitty reality check, Max essentially made her best friend decide to never talk to Wheeler again, a kid that she knew El treasured more than anyone realized, if only because El was so damn thankful that he saved her when she'd been lost, both literally and figuratively.

Clearly her throat awkwardly to grab El's attention, Max leaped off the bed, seized with the need to make El feel better. "Uhh..." Max grabbed the spare brush off her nightstand. "Do you want me to do your hair? It's short, but maybe I can braid it." She offered, feeling even more guilty at the grateful look El tossed her in response.

"Will you? That would be so nice." El cooed, walking over to the chair Max was gesturing to.

As El sat down, Max squeezed her shoulders supportively before running her nimble fingers through El's soft waves, her mind already coming up with several hairstyle ideas. Max decided then and there, that firstly: she'll work her magic on El's hair and secondly: she'll make damn sure that El will have the best time at Troy's stupid party. It was the least she could do for El, Max thought as she started parting El's waves down the middle. Mike Wheeler, be damned. "No problem, El."

The clock blinking on her nightstand showed that Max had a little under fifteen minutes before the boys dropped by to pick them up. The rest of the time was spent in silence, anxiousness and anticipation brewing between the two girls as the soft hums of the Sex Pistol played in the background.

It was going to be a wild night, Max thought. She could just feel it.

Jesus Fucking Christ: I'm BAAAAACK! Hello, hello, hello, hello -

1. I'm truly so sorry for taking this long to post a new chapter. As cliché as it sounds (ugh, I hate when authors say this but I have to

say it), life took over! Right after I uploaded chapter 2, school hit me like crazy. I had maybe four big-ass essay to write and then right after was finals. And there was this wildfire that fucked up school. And right after was Holidays so I really couldn't do anything, so I'm so sorry for keeping you all waiting.

2. I literally almost died when I saw the feedback for Chapter 2. I am so thankful for every one of you. Seriously. I can't convey how these comments make me feel - you're all so damn supportive. I have people telling me that they've re-read my work like 5x and other people telling me that they check on my story every day. It's crazy! I'm so thankful - the only thing I've ever wanted to do with my writing is touch people and I think this story manages to do exactly that. So thank you! Just know, all your comments are reviewed and loved!

3. There is no Mike in this chapter or the other boys and I'm so sorry for that, but I felt that this was a pivotal moment between the girls that needed to be addressed. Also, this chapter was intended to be longer, with many other scenes but like my other chapters, I didn't anticipate how much I'd write for each scene haha. Anyways, I got a lot of good stuff planned for the next few chapters so please stay tuned!

4. I DECIDED I AM GOING TO CHANGE THE TITLE. IT'S GOING TO BE UNDER A NEW NAME AND I WILL CHANGE IT BY JANUARY 1ST, 2018 SO PLEASE KEEP A HEAD'S UP. (And potentially, new summary so please keep a look out!) Not sure what the title will be yet.

Anyways, I hope you're all enjoying the end of 2017! Much love.

4. In The Station Wagon We Go

February 14th, 1989 (10:30pm)

"Come on, *ladies*. Gas is 'a burning. Time is 'a wasting. Stop making out on the porch and get in the damn car – we don't have all night." As if his voice wasn't obnoxious enough, Dustin just *had* to pair his yapping with a blaring honk after each sentence. That was the sight that greeted the two girls, as they locked up the Hargrove-Mayfield resident: Dustin Henderson perched over the center console from the back seat, his ass practically attached to Will's disgusted face and his broccoli hair to Lucas', to reach the steering wheel's horn. And of-fucking-course, all four windows were down. Had it not been for El running towards Lucas' Station Wagon, Max would've swiveled right back into her house, promises be damned. "I need to get there *before* all the alc is sucked dry by those filthy leeches."

"Would you pipe the fuck down, Henderson? I do have neighbors, you know? I'm gonna kick your ass if Old Man Shinsky sets his rabid watchdogs on me again." Max threatened as she begrudgingly slid into passenger's seat. Not sparing Lucas even a glance, her seatbelt just barely clicked its lock when she immediately twisted around to hound on Dustin once more: "And who's fucking fault is it that we're gonna be late? How long did it take for you to glue some pubes on your balls this time, huh? I heard Jennifer likes them hairy."

"Almost as long as it took for you to pluck your five o'clock shadow. Jesus Max, your razor is dulling. Maybe we should stop at a 7/11, Lucas." Dustin croaked, the laughter spilling out of his lips cut short as Lucas made a particularly sharp turn.

"I don't have time for either of you wastoids' bullshit." Lucas grumbled, his comment provoking a seething look from Max. The black teen merely rolled his eyes at her childish antics and stepped harder on the gas pedal; trust Max to manipulate a joke for her little vendetta.

"Do we have time to stop by Bradley's Big Buy?" El chimed in sweetly, grabbing Lucas' attention.

"You hungry, El?" Lucas asked, his mind already beginning to calculate the fastest route to Big Buy. She's been without some Eggo's for a while, he surmised. Best to get some while they were all still sober.

"I thought you said you were full, babe?" Max asked, confusion painted in her voice. They had a pizza party earlier, courtesy of her step-father's asshole money. With wings, of course. El said the taste reminds her of squirrel meat; how that is more comforting than triggering, Max will never know.

"I am," El hastily confirmed, not wanting the Party to worry. She felt like a ditz for not remembering earlier, since now they might be even more late to Troy's, but Hopper always said: "but shouldn't we bring something to the party? Maybe chips? You know, to say thank you for having us?"

It was silent for a second, as everyone processed El's words. Had this question been posed years ago, when they all first met, perhaps Dustin might've chortled patronizingly, or Lucas might've tauntingly asked: "Is she serious right now?" But they were all too close for that immature bullshit, these days. And too old.

"Hm," Will started instead, his tone lacking an ounce of mockery as he seriously considered her idea "definitely for another type of party, we should. But not this one, these guys don't expect anyone to bring anything-

"I mean, they're rich as fuck, they should pay *me*, for even showing up..." El caught Dustin's mutterings.

"-they just want everyone to have a good time." Will finished, his words placating El's worries. She sighed in relief, grateful that she was in such capable hands who knew all the social scenes, despite not actively participating in it; she would've been so upset if she accidentally fucked this up over a bag of chips.

"And trust me, El, this ain't like Mrs. Sinclair's Sunday dinner parties. No one's going to be eating, at all." Max assured her.

"More like drinking away their misery." Dustin hiccuped, making a

motion of tipping his head back and downing some imaginative beer.

"Are you sure you don't want food El? We're gonna stay there for at least three hours." Lucas asked again, his brown eyes catching El's matching ones in the rear view mirror. She shook her head in decline, a thankful smile on her pink lips. "I'm good, Lucas. Thank you."

"Speaking of bringing shit!" Dustin hollered, grabbing everyone's attention. "Mama Dustin got you a present, pretty-Elly."

"Mama Dustin?" Max repeated, unimpressed, as Dustin made a show of diving to the car floor to grab at a Radioshack bag that laid forgotten by Will's feet.

"He's buzzed." Will clarified in the same unimpressed tone, as Dustin yanked Will's ankles aside, "Fuckin' move your feet, will you Byers? I'm gonna have to start calling you 'Big Feet, Small Dick Byers,' again."

"Do that and I'll raid your porn magazines and feed them to Tews, again." Will threatened, moving his feet nonetheless.

"Ha! I moved my mags already, that will never happen again." Dustin bragged, his eyes practically shining as he passed the plastic bag to El's lap.

"Really? Want to bet?" Will baited, smirking cheekily.

"Yes, I'll bet you five shots, you'll never find them."

"You're on." Will agreed, instantaneously whipping his body towards the driver seat. "Lucas, where's his stash hidden now?"

Just as instantly, Lucas supplied: "Behind his desk with Yertle's tank."

"Thanks, man-

"What the fuck, Lucas?" Dustin wailed, affronted, his eyes darting around the car in bewilderment: Will, that smug bastard, had an annoying 'I-told-you-so' look that made Dustin want to frog him in his pretty-boy face; El was looking at him in amazement, as if she would've never guessed that spot had it not been for Lucas' blurting;

Max, in all her bitchiness, did not even try to hold in her snickers; and Lucas, the fucking ultimate traitor, looked unflinchingly at the road. "How the Hell could you possibly know that? Do you fucking spy on me, you Peepin' Tom?"

"No. And that's such a disturbing accusation. Like I'd take anytime out of my day to watch you romance your right hand."

"Then, how do you know?!" Dustin demanded, ready to leap over the console again.

"Your mom told me-

"My mom?!" Dustin cried, fucking horrified. Max's laughter doubled.

"She found them, like two weeks ago, and she called me to tell me the news." Lucas explained, his tone so casual that one might've thought he was talking about groceries.

"What news? That I'm about to escape to Kentucky because the lady who *birthed* me knows I yank off to Playboy?!"

"Kentucky? Really, Dustin?" Will interrupted, disapprovingly. "At least head to Ohio. Their chili is so wicked."

"Fine, Ohio. Anywhere but fucking Hawkins."

"Chill out, Dustin." Lucas told him "It's not a big deal, she was so excited when she called. Said she was glad she found 'em 'cause she was starting to worry, since you never brought any girls home." By the end of his explanation, chuckles started to spill out, extorting his casual tone, as the humor of the situation began to sink in. Even El began giggling at Dustin's misfortune.

"Alright first of all," At that, everyone in the car, save El, groaned simultaneously. Dustin only ever used those words when he was 'bout to spiel. "Oh shut up, dickheads, this won't take long. Okay what was I saying? Oh yeah- first of all- ain't nothing wrong with being gay – love you, Will – so that's lame she had a cow about me being into chicks. And second of all, why didn't you cover for me? Or at least tell me, when it happened. I've been walking around my house unaware that I was defamed! Slandered! My good name-

"You're such a little drama queen," Max cut in "as if we all didn't know you're a horn-dog that loves two-dimensional women."

"Hey! I resent that! Simone Eden is more three-dimensional than you'll ever be, Maxine."

"That doesn't even make sense..." Will critiqued, always the technical one. "And you still owe me five shots later, Dustin."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just drop this before I need us to turn to the nearest Church so I can douse myself in Holy Water. God knows I need the Lord's guidance more than ever, now." Dustin moaned, falling back dramatically to his seat, his misery making El's empathetic heart squeeze painfully.

"Hey, hey," she said, shaking Dustin's arm loosely. At his inquiring glance, she lifted the plastic bag off her lap. "Let's open my present, yeah?"

At that, a smile beamed widely on the boy's face and he quickly uprighted his posture once more, his excitement provoking the seatbelt to pull him back. "Open it, open it-"

She did as he prompted, not knowing what to expect. Reaching something cool and hard, El pulled out: a handle of Honey Jack-Daniels. Almost a quarter empty.

"Oh fuck, you got Daniels?" Max appraised, her excitement indicating to El that this was probably a good present.

"Ha!" Always one to keen for validation and positive reinforcement, Dustin puffed his cheeks out proudly. Damn right, he got Daniels. "I told you I had a present-

"I mean technically *I* got the present." Will corrected, if only to steal Dustin's thunder.

Dustin groaned at that. Fucking Byers and his fucking technicalities, it will be the death of Dustin one day, no doubt.

"Are you kidding me? This shit was my idea. I thought it up like almost 24 hours ago. That's dibs man, read the handbook."

"Yeah, but the Daniels' from Jonathan. Which *I* paid for, with my money."

"Jesus Christ, Will. Tomato, tomato. You're just never on my side, these days. Fine, be like that, Jonathan got it and Will paid for it, so it's Will's present." Dustin relented, a frown coating his lips. He had a bad habit of always trying to assume the role of El's Hero or whatever, so it was always 'I picked up some Eggos and M&M for you El,' or 'I got you a present, baby girl,' or 'Tell Hop and Joyce I can take you home today.' 'Still, you can't deny I thought up Daniels. And Honey Daniels, at that.'

"Thank you, Dustin." El smiled brightly, prompting another grin from the boy. She'd never had alcohol before, never seeing a reason to do so, but finally, this was the moment.

"Yeah, I'm impressed, Dustin." Lucas commended from the front. "I expected some Rosé from your mother's wine cabinet, again."

"Me too," Max agreed, marking the first words of amicability within 24 hours between the two. "That shit is starting to taste like water, what with how often we drink it."

"Beggars can't be choosers, shitheads. Also, my mom totally caught me last time or something, 'cause she changed the lock. Now it's not the key type, but a fucking four-digit code one, how mental is that?" Dustin grumbled; until he figured out what the code was, it seemed the Party had to cough up money to indulge in their rebellious, adolescent activities.

"Alright, sounds like a problem for another time, let's drink up. Will, did you grab the cups we left at your house last time?" Max asked, eyeing the bottle excitedly. The pizza should be long digested by now, she needed at least five shots to call this a successful pre-game. And they only had – she did a quick glance at the road before her to check their landmarks – roughly ten more minutes to reach the outskirts of Loch Nora. Perfect. Plenty of time to get half sloshed.

"Course I did, I'm not an airhead who's going to make their friends drink straight." Will affirmed, looking pointedly at Lucas.

"Alright motherfucker that was one time, nobody got mono so pipe your germophobic ass down." Lucas refuted, his response provoking Dustin's ugly cackle.

"That's rich coming from you," Will sassed, mirth emanating from his smirk. "I see the way you use two straws when you share milkshakes with Max even though you guys are saliva buddies."

"I don't see no problems with that, sharing straws is potentially a health hazard. It's in the Bible, check that shit."

"Of course you don't, you hypocrite. And your parents are *atheists*."

"Doesn't mean I can't read a Bible."

"Alright, shut the fuck up both of you." Max interrupted, annoyed that the topic of her and Lucas was brought up when they were in a fight. "Let's just drink," she said, reaching for the bottle from El.

Just as her freckled hand touched the tip of the cap, Dustin smacked her greedy hand away. "Slow down, Zoomer. El's got first sip,"

"Fuck, okay." She retreated her hand. "Go for it, El."

"Okay," El said, almost hesitatingly. "Do I need a cup, then?"

"Nah, just for you, you can drink it straight." Will offered, presenting her with an encouraging smile. He pointedly ignored the yells of 'Nepotism' and 'Favoritism' from Lucas up front.

"Do we have chase?" Max asked, as El twisted the cap off.

"Chase is for bitches, Mayfield." Dustin chided, his face a mix of disappointment and judgment directed at the Red-head.

"Not for me, you barf bag." Max deadpanned. "For El!"

"Oh shit," Will groaned "I forgot that."

"I got some water in the back seat." Lucas mentioned, flicking his thumb up to motion in the general area. "One of you is probably sitting on it. Give that to El,"

It took a few fumbles but eventually a plastic, half-empty water bottle was thrust into El's dainty hands. And the image of her, in her cute dress, hair done up, with a whiskey handle almost the size of her frame in one hand and a crinkled water bottle in the other, and her face utterly confused yet anticipatory, was truly a sight to see. Without hesitation, she lifted the whiskey to her lips and drank.

The hollering and cheers of the Party engulfed the Station Wagon.

Like a true badass, she *drank*. If anyone had expected the tiny angel to take a small sip and be done with it, they needed to eat their words, because El Hopper *gulped*. She gulped until the burn became slightly more bearable and when she was finished, there was a noticeable gap from her intake as the handle was returned back to Dustin down almost a quarter of what it previously was. Calmly, not reacting to Max's proud claps, she eased the burn in her throat with a few sips of water.

"Now *thatwas* bitchin'." The description 'proud dad' could not match the pride that exuded off Dustin Henderson, at that point. He was impressed beyond belief, but completely unsurprised that his El swigged her first drink like that.

"You good, babe?" Max laughed, as El huffed a short puff once she capped the water bottle.

"Just peachy," El answered, repeating the phrase Joyce likes to use when she's in a good mood. She dazzled them with a lazy smile, the rush that accompanied the burn already warming her tiny body. El snuggled into the leather seats, her frame gingerly curling into Will's side.

Patting El's flop of curls, Will passed the cups to Dustin, who began filling a generous amount for each party member.

"Here, Red." Dustin passed a cup over the console to Max. "Make yourself fun."

Just as the exchange occurred, the Station Wagon hit a bump in the road, making the car jerk upwards slightly. Such actions triggered a chain reaction, in that the cup exchanged fumbled slightly, making

the whiskey in it slosh dangerously. Though not a drop was spilt, as Max quickly pulled the cup close to her chest to negate any more chances of spills, Lucas was on them – or rather, Max – instantaneously.

"Could you be a little more careful, Max? You know this isn't my car." He berated her, pissed by the would-be situation. It was already risky enough borrowing his mother's car, let alone drink in it, but his usual Toyota MR2 was at the shop and he was set on being DD tonight. "My parents will fucking scalp me, if you spill on the seats."

"You need to take a chill pill," Max told him, taking a big chug of her Daniels. Based on the way her blood was beginning to boil with every word Lucas reproachingly threw her way, Max was gearing herself up for a fight. With alcohol. (She really could not deal with him sober, tonight, she realized half-way through the car ride.) "Maybe if you didn't drive like a maniac, we wouldn't have hit that bump. And nothing even spilled, dipshit."

"Yeah, I know nothing spilled but I'm saying it as a contingency. And do you want to get to the party quickly or not?"

"Contingency? Don't use big, fancy words when I'm drinking." Max complained, her sentiments prompting an 'Amen' from Dustin in the backseat, who was also slurping down his drink as if it was water. Max took another chug, finishing off the cup.

"There. No alcohol, no drops. You happy?" She mocked, rolling her eyes. Without waiting for his answer, she twisted around to face the backseat once more, thrusting the cup into Dustin's face. "Refill, Henderson."

"Fuck off, I'm drinking." Dustin said, waving her cup to Will's direction.

Will, looking unaffected by the tensions brewing, was occupying his time with stroking El's hair comfortingly, as the girl gazed outside the window, and nursing his own whiskey cup. Seeing her empty cup, he nodded and, retracting his arm from El, they silently exchanged cups so that he could pour more into Max's.

"No, I'm not fucking happy when you're picking a fight with me." Lucas growled, feeling a migraine approach as Max just scoffed at his response and started nursing her second cup. And he hadn't even had a lick of alcohol yet.

"That's really not my problem."

"Like how it's not your problem if I get toasted for *yours* spills?"

"Oh my God, I didn't even spill shit! Just drive slower, there's totally no need to go 80 on a local, and maybe you'll actually see the potholes you're supposed to be avoiding."

"Stop fucking tell me how to drive-

"Then learn how to drive!"

"I'm so tempted to turn this shit around-

"Do it-

"Oh my God!" Dustin shouted, his groan halting their argument. "Can you guys stop your lover's quarrel, please?" He practically begged, eyes glossy and mouth already beginning to reek of Honey Daniels. It was also another bad habit of him to drink without chase or pause. "You guys are *murdering* my sorry excuse of a buzz.

Had Max not been triggered into such a foul mood, by her boyfriend-not-boyfriend no less, she would've taken her own advice and copped a chill pill. Sure, she could be petty, but she hated arguing in front of others, even if they were her best friends. It was an ingrained rule in her household to keep shit like this, private. But she was gulping down alcohol in waves and her anger was still fresh as white snow fall, so she couldn't help but bite out: "Tell him to stop being an overreacting ass and maybe, I'll consider getting over it!"

If that sounded fucking childish, then so be it. And if she slurred her last four words, then that was that, too.

Sober and impulsive, though one would expect a person like him to think more before speaking, Lucas snapped: "Jesus fucking Christ, Max, you're so fucking immature-

"Immature?!" She screeched, the shrillness making the three in the back wince. Lucas just ground his teeth, eyes still set on the road. Max kept on raving, "You can fucking eat my shorts-

"Speaking of lover's quarrel-" Dustin loudly interrupted, his voice purposefully overpowering Max's to garner both of their attention. There was an embarrassing crack in his voice, but he brushed that off; voice cracks be damned, anything to get the pseudo-parents of the group to shut up. "Willy boy, how's Ricky?" Dustin asked, turning to Will.

At that name, Will immediately flushed, his body stiffening as if a dragon from "Icewind Dale" had breathed its icy breath onto his person.

Will Byers's fourth period was dedicated to TA-ing an 11th grade English class: Ms. Franklin's American-literature class. There was a boy in there – whose name was *not* related to 'Ricky' in the slightest – that Will Byers perhaps, maybe, quite certainly was into. But like most queer, homosexual love-stories, his crush's probability of being a heterosexual male, was unfortunately high.

That didn't stop Will Byers from fawning over him, the cute boy with brunette curls and a deep, reverberating laugh and who always managed to greet him with a polite "Hey Will," every time he passed by Will's TA table by the corner of the classroom. And that definitely didn't stop Will Byers from adopting an alias for his crush, a way to reserve the incognito aspect of his unrequited love, coined from his mother's Spanish soap operas that Will catches her indulging in, thrice every week. And like most secrets in the Party, his crush on 'Ricky' didn't stay secretive for long, hence Dustin's tendency to bring him up every so often.

"He's uh...fine, I guess." Will finally said, once his blush quieted and receded to the tips of his pale neck. He gently swatted El's hand away as she attempted to chase the blush with her index finger. "I don't know...I haven't talked to him since Wednesday." Not that he was keeping count. Of course not.

"Oh that's right, we saw him at Benny's huh? With Mike," Dustin recalled, remembering the brief moment of excitement that engulfed

him when he finally got a clear look of this 'Ricky' boy. Not to brag, but Dustin was pretty bad at spying on people. The kid had no idea he was being surveilled by the AV President at all. Dustin was sneaky like that. Also, 'Ricky' was way too focused on his burger to even notice a watching eye, though Dustin had to give him props for the way he devoured Benny's Deluxe special like that. Not even a drop of ketchup was wasted.

At the sound of Mike's name, El roused up from Will's side. She'd been so caught up with what was happening in the car ride over to Loch Nora that she'd almost forgotten about Mike Wheeler. And just like that, a flutter of excitement, nerves, and butterflies flooded her. Her body felt warm at just the thought of him, like how it felt when she downed the whiskey. She wondered if this was how Max felt every time she thought about Lucas. Or Will, to this 'Ricky' boy.

"Yeah, uh, exactly." Will sputtered embarrassingly, his hand reaching up to smoothen his hair habitually. Another social tell that he needed to break, fuck. God forbid he saw him tonight and did that in front of him.

It was after that fated Wednesday lunch that Will caught 'Ricky' right after school, a feat that was so pleasantly surprising that it was a wonder how Will didn't break out in sweats. Ricky actually approached him in the parking lot, as Will waited for Jonathan to come pick him up – thank God his brother was late that afternoon.

The conversation was such a blur, meshed up of inquiries about Benny's and Ms. Franklin's recent assignment, that Will could barely remember anything concrete from it. Only that his palms felt clammy by the end of it and when Jonathan paused for him to get in, Will hesitated as he clutched the metal handle of his brother's Ford LTD, so tempted beyond belief to give 'Ricky,' who stood waiting for him to drive off, a hug or at least a fucking high-five. Any physical contact, really. But he didn't. He just got into the car, as per usual. And as Jonathan pulled out of the lot, Will resisted the urge to look back, to check if 'Ricky' was still there.

Will still wasn't sure if he regretted that moment, even after so many days later. Why did that feel akin to a lost opportunity?

"Well, if he runs in Mike's circle, he'll probably be there tonight." Lucas surmised, his voice snatching Will out of his musings. Their Station Wagon was turning onto the street, Will knew intuitively, that Troy Wich lived on. "I'll give you a head's up, if I see him."

"Thanks Lucas," Will said, feeling relieved for some reason.

"Me too," Dustin added, sounding excited at the prospect. Will was starting to think Dustin might've been a romantic at heart, that or he was deprived in his own love life, so he was keen to live vicariously through Will's. "That way, you can hunt him down properly, maybe accost him in a bathroom, and drop to your knees. Give him the ol' razzle dazzle – no teeth, okay? – and get to the boinking, afterwards. That sounds fucking rad. You hellas need to get laid, Byers. Your drawings won't help you nut, trust me."

Then again, Will grimaced at Dustin's vulgarity, maybe not so much of a romantic. Just a skeez.

At El's curious eyes, she couldn't have picked up on all of Dustin's vague phrasings, Will merely waved her off, telling her silently that it wasn't anything important for her to know, just Dustin being Dustin. As usual, El understood him perfectly.

As disgusted as Will was for Dustin's words – he never thought of 'Ricky' that, he swears! – Max, however, was having the time of her fucking life, her drink once again threatening to spill – it seems like Lucas' side glares were preventing gravity from intervening – as she bellowed out in peals of laughter. "I'll drink to that!" She shouted, happily.

Will couldn't help but smile at the comment, "You guys are both shitheads."

What a night this was turning out to be, and Lucas hadn't even found street parking yet.

As Dustin, Lucas, and Max started arguing about which street to park on – "I do *not* want to park in front of his house, that's where all the drunk posers are going to yack!" – and El curled herself once again to Will's side, Will gave a short prayer to whatever God that was out

there, that they would keep these good vibes all throughout the night.

Welcome to Troy Wich's Valentine's Day Banger.

Hello Everyone!

It's been sosososososo long, it feels tremendously good to be back. First of all, I'd like to offer my apology and my gratitude for every reader that has graced this story. I'm really sorry I lagged this long to upload - most of you probably thought I ditched it forever, and to an extent, that had been true. I remember I was so excited writing this story but when I got to chapter four, I struggled so hard with getting the dialect and scene perfectly. I restarted it maybe six times and it still wasn't coming out how I envisioned it. So I let it sit for a little bit, hoping the words would flow naturally. But it never did, and my academics eventually made me so busy. I studied abroad for a bit and then I switched uni's and I was so overwhelmed with my life that I just lost the inspiration to write this story. Which is very sad because I had a whole notebook of ideas collecting dust in my home. But yes, I'm terribly sorry for all of those readers I've left in the dark - I know how it feels like, opening your notifications every day, hoping that that one story has finally updated and getting met with disappointment when it did not. I want everyone to know that I read every message, sentiment, review sent my way and I really really really treasure them. I'm so grateful that I still have fans encouraging me in 2019, even though my last update was 2017!, to continue this story.

You are all actually the reason why I picked up on it again. I was going through all my messages and I felt the inspiration burst within me. And I started writing nonstop from 8pm-1am. I have no notes, I have no betas, no editing - this is the roughest draft there is but I couldn't wait to publish this. I'm going to try my best to start publishing my regularly but please don't expect much, I don't want to let anyone down and I don't want to string anyone along.

It feels so good to be writing again, it truly does. I have nothing

more to say other than I hope the fans that I had when I started this piece will somehow come upon this story again, because I dedicate this chapter to all of you! Thank you for everyone's support!

p.s. I'm so fucking excited for season three